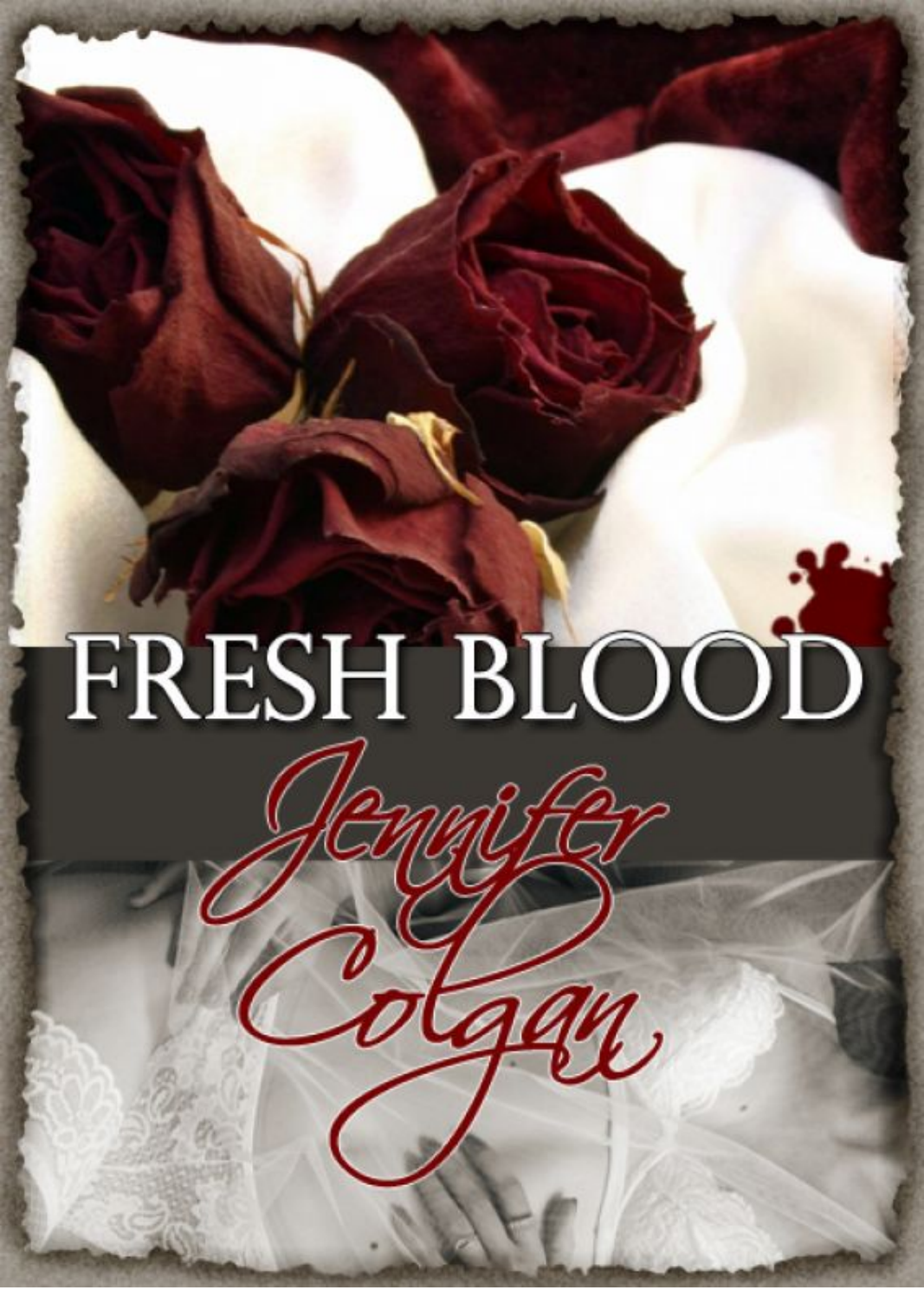

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FRESH BLOOD

By
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Chapter One

The sultry beat coming from the interior of After Dark competed with the staccato of Erica Talbot's heart as she approached the side door of the nightclub. The white stucco wall, along which the line of hopefuls waited, vibrated from the new age acid rock playing within. The bone-deep pulse made the other young women in the line loose-limbed and excited. They swayed to the beat even though whatever melody the song might have had was inaudible in the alley behind the club.

Erica wanted to act just like the others. She tried to adopt the distant, dreamy expression so many of them wore but she just didn't have it in her. She'd long ago resigned herself to having no rhythm, no sexy sway and no desire to hide the sharp intelligence that shone from her hazel eyes.

Tonight she'd traded her usual style, conservative pinstriped slacks and tailored button-down blouse, for a short leather skirt and a low-cut satin T that did little to hide the black push-up bra she wore underneath. Glitter-dusted stockings and ankle-breaking black stilettos completed her outfit, and her golden blonde hair swirled in a wild updo that left her neck suggestively bare. She'd accented her lips with a shade of red that should have been illegal, and applied an extra layer of mascara to her already long lashes.

At least she looked like she fit in. Only her stiff posture gave her away. Anyone looking long enough would have figured out that she had nothing but disdain for the whole affair. This was not her world, and it never would be.

It disgusted her that Elena might be found in a place like this. Might be--if she wasn't at one of the dozen other bars like After Dark that had sprung up over the past few years when the vampire population in Illinois began a disconcerting upswing. This was just the type of place in which her sister would feel right at home.

"You. You. Not you." The muscle-bound bouncer who held court at the metal fire door gestured one of the waiting girls out of line with a tilt of his bald head. The redhead in a black sheath dress, cloggy heels and black lipstick couldn't have been more than sixteen. The layers of kohl that ringed her eyes did nothing to hide the lack of wrinkles, or the hardened edge of lost innocence in her expression.

The vicious curse she hurled at the man--in a voice that spoke of a two-pack a day habit--shattered any illusion of gothic sophistication. She flipped him the bird and sauntered off, mumbling threats under her breath.

The last two women he'd let in lingered at the door watching the girl retreat with smug satisfaction. They thought they were better than her. Luckier. If only they knew.

Erica was next in line, and the bouncer eyed her as though he were appraising a cut of beef. She smiled and lowered her thick lashes in what she

hoped was a demure, come-hither look. “Do you smoke?” he asked.

The question surprised her. She wondered if he meant tobacco or if the question was some type of code she didn’t understand. “No.”

He looked her over again and then grasped her wrists with his enormous hands. Her first instinct was to jerk away from his grip, but she held her disgust in check. She had to get inside the club, even if only for a few minutes. When he turned her hands palm up revealing the unblemished undersides of her forearms, relief eased the adrenaline rush to her head. “No needle marks,” he said. “Do you snort?”

“No!”

He looked at her face, and she held his bloodshot gaze for a tense moment. “You’re in,” he said finally, then turned to the others. “That’s all for tonight.”

A wave of recriminations traveled through the dozen or so women left in the alley. “Come back tomorrow.” He sounded apologetic just for an instant. But when the women didn’t immediately scatter, he cursed at them in a gravelly voice that made the skin on the back of Erica’s neck tighten in fear.

He pushed her inside and shut the fire door with a clang that rocked the gritty plaster walls. At the end of the narrow hallway where the chosen ones waited, two other men stood shoulder to shoulder, blocking most of the view into the club. Behind them, blue lights pulsed in time to the music that seemed to have grown ten times louder. While the fifteen women jockeyed for position in the hallway, the bouncer and his two friends did a head count and started on the body searches.

Erica fought to disengage her gag reflex when the men squatted behind each of the women and ran their hands up under each girl’s skirt from ankle to thigh. The others didn’t seem to mind the frisking, but the thought of some stranger shoving his fingers between her thighs made Erica lightheaded. She bit her lip and sidled through the line, letting other women go ahead of her and shuffling around until she stood with the ones that had already undergone the search.

When the two door guards parted and motioned the girls into the club, Erica’s dignity remained blessedly intact. She kept her head down as she passed the men and in seconds lost herself in the river of bodies that filled the dance floor.

Now she had her work cut out for her. In the pulsating light, the scene before her looked like an old-time nickel-movie, everyone jerking around in stop motion. In each flash of neon blue, Erica scanned the faces around her hoping to catch a glimpse of her sister.

The last time she’d seen Elena her twin had sported short black hair, and blue contact lenses hid the natural hazel green of her eyes. To a stranger, the Talbot sisters wouldn’t have appeared related at all. It still amazed Erica sometimes to think they’d come from the same womb. Even if she were in disguise, though, Erica would know her sister by the way she moved, her

voice, and the intensity of her gaze, which even contact lenses couldn't hide. If Elena were here, Erica would find her.

She decided to make one complete circuit of the place, checking the bar, the restroom and even the waitresses who carried trays of drinks and plates of food. Who could eat in a place like this? The noise alone made Erica sick to her stomach. Maybe you had to be drunk to enjoy it. She figured a person certainly had to be drunk to want to party with vampires.

The only good thing about After Dark was the lack of smoke. The lighting was nauseating but the atmosphere inside was crystal clear. She wondered why. Certainly vampires had no fear of lung cancer. Maybe it was the flare of a match that made them nervous. Either way, Erica was grateful that she didn't have to squint through the acrid haze that polluted most of the human clubs.

Pale faces and half-clad bodies swam by in rapid succession until the details of their features began to blur. Erica finally reached the bar and clung to the leather pad that cushioned its edge. On either side of her, patrons leaned in comfort while they sipped drinks and attempted to talk over the pounding music.

Elena's wasn't among the faces that turned to appraise her, so Erica did her best to avoid eye contact until the barmaid slapped a red cocktail napkin down in front of her.

"What can I get you?" The woman was six feet of blond, Nordic perfection. The only thing marring her appearance was the brilliant white tip of an elongated incisor that peeked out beneath her upper lip. Erica swallowed. Female vampires were known to be vicious, carnal creatures, much less likely to maintain a semblance of their human existence than their male counterparts. Erica formed her answer carefully.

"I'll have a martini."

"Dry?"

"Sure."

The bartender whirled away, her sleeveless sequined T-shirt glittering.

Erica clutched the edge of the bar tighter and stared at her featureless reflection in the polished laminate of the bar top.

I'm out of my mind, she thought. This had to be the last time she came to her sister's rescue. She'd peeled Elena off of too many filthy bar stools and sat in the police station too many times, waiting for her sister to come teetering out of a holding cell reeking of smoke and sex.

The fact that this time was different just added to the hopelessness of the situation. This time the static-broken message on Erica's answering machine had sounded truly desperate, not just momentarily needy. "I've been hanging out at ... you know ... the vampire bar. Come get me, Ricki, I need you to help me figure out a way out of this one...."

Erica had listened to the message at least two dozen times and still

couldn't make out the name of the bar, so she'd started with the letter A.

By the time the bartender returned with her drink, she'd decided it was time to move on to the next letter, which meant a place called Danger--Danger on the far side of town. As far as Erica was concerned, it might as well have been called Stupid--Stupid. That's how she felt.

At least she was reasonably sure no one would recognize her. She didn't know any vampires personally ... at least she hoped she didn't.

"What do I owe you?" she asked.

The vampiress laughed. "You don't have to buy your own drinks, babe."

"I--"

"I'll keep a tab for you and when someone picks you up, he'll pay the bill. Sorry, he or she--we don't discriminate here."

"No one's going to pick me up. In fact, I'm leaving. I've got ... to be somewhere else." Erica rummaged in her tiny purse and pulled out a rumpled ten-dollar bill. She flattened it out with shaky fingers and pushed it across the shiny surface of the bar.

Before she let go of the bill, a hairy-knuckled hand closed over her arm. "You!"

Erica jerked her hand away this time, and the force of the movement sent the top-heavy martini glass skittering down the bar showering patrons with vodka and vermouth.

"What's the problem, Frank?" The barmaid grabbed the glass before it rolled off the bar and swiped at the clear puddle with a rag. She looked mildly annoyed at the intrusion but not as angry as 'Frank.'

"This one didn't get searched." The bouncer from the alley yanked Erica around to face him. While those nearby watched in detached amusement, he shoved Erica backward against the bar and spread her legs with one of his massive thighs. With her back arched and her breasts practically even with his nose, there was little she could do but submit. She held her breath against the overpowering aroma of cheap cologne and turned her head. A sick feeling crept up from her belly when his meaty hand slithered down her side and he yanked up the hem of her skirt and rummaged underneath.

"I should throw you right out," he said. His face was so close to hers that she was able to make out the gold plated initial F inscribed on his front tooth. At least his breath smelled of a recently chewed Altoid.

Erica looked away again when one of his fingers dipped under the garter that held her stockings in place. "What are you looking for?" She didn't want to sound breathless and terrified, but that's how the words came out.

"Stakes. Bitches always hide 'em up their skirts."

The crowd at the bar backed up a little at that. When Frank finally brought his hand up, empty, they shuffled back to their places.

"You're clean," he said with a leer. Erica felt anything but clean. Her

flesh tingled unpleasantly where he'd explored. "Who's buyin' for you?"

"What?"

"You don't have a buyer yet?"

"She said she's leavin', Frank. Why don't you just escort the lady to the door?" The bartender gave Erica a snide look as she tucked the ten-spot into her apron.

Frank obliged by yanking Erica toward him. "Let's go."

"I'm buying for her."

The voice sent a chill down Erica's spine. Deep and sexy with a hint of British accent, it was a voice that could melt a woman or freeze her. Frank let her go instantly as if contact with her skin suddenly burned him.

Erica looked up at her dubious savior and did her best not to react. She'd never thought of a man as beautiful, but she couldn't think of another word to describe him. His hair was midnight black, and his eyes were the bottomless blue of a tropical ocean. His white shirt lay open to the second button, and a dark tie hung askew as though he'd just loosened it. A gold pinky ring gleamed on his right hand as he held it out to her.

Frank and the barmaid exchanged a glance before they both went back to their duties, leaving Erica on her own. The man's scrutiny left her feeling naked and much too warm, and she found herself wishing she'd brought a stake just so Frank would have a reason to throw her out.

"I was just leaving." What a cliché. True, but nevertheless. She might as well have told him she had to go home and wash her hair. He studied her for a moment and his eyes darkened, not with anger, but with something else that made Erica just as uncomfortable. When he spoke, his words left no room for argument.

"The management here doesn't like drop-ins. If a human comes in, it's understood what they're here for. If you want to leave without someone feeding on you, you'll come with me."

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Chapter Two

Erica stared at the man before her. He didn't look much like a vampire. His skin wasn't all that pale. His blue eyes practically sparked with inner fire, and she didn't see any fangs. She glanced back at the barmaid, but found no ally there. With her spilled drink paid for, the blonde Amazon had no further use for her.

"I ..."

He didn't wait for her to finish her sentence. He reached forward and grabbed her wrist. A second later, he was dragging her after him through the undulating crush on the dance floor.

He pulled her toward the club's front door, the exit reserved for vampires. Humans came and went only by way of the alley. If she hadn't been anxious to leave anyway, she might not have waited until he yanked her down the two shallow front steps and into the empty street to protest.

When they hit the rain-damp macadam, he whirled her around to face him, his long fingers cold as iron around her arm.

She twisted in his grasp, but he only tightened his grip.

"What were you doing in there?" His question seemed personal, delivered in a tone of reproachful concern, as if he actually cared.

"I was just looking around." She pulled ineffectually at her trapped wrist and briefly considered using a groin shot to make him let her go. Of course, in her hooker heels, she probably couldn't have outrun her own grandmother.

"Looking for what?"

"Nothing! I was ... just curious. You're hurting me."

"I don't believe you." He looked down his aquiline nose at her with the obvious intent to intimidate. Erica held his gaze, but angled her body away from him in an attempt to keep herself just outside the range of those hypnotic eyes.

"Who are you, anyway? The owner? What does it matter why I came in? I paid for my drink and I left. No harm done, and I won't be coming back."

"No. You won't. I don't want to see you back here. This isn't the place for you."

Erica raised an eyebrow. "Who are you again--my knight protector?"

His molten gaze traveled to her wrist, and he let her go so abruptly that she stumbled backward a step. "I just don't want to see an innocent drawn into that world. Anybody can see you don't belong in there."

Innocent? Is that what he thought she was? Ha. What she wouldn't give to be innocent again. She tossed her head in a gesture of defiance, gave him a practiced smirk and turned away. "What I do is none of your business."

"Actually, it is."

When she turned back to give him another piece of her mind, a dull silver glint caught her eye. He held out a leather wallet with a round badge and a laminated ID tucked under thin black bands.

A cop? Her mind boomeranged around that one. Since when did cops cover vampire territory? As far as Erica knew, what went on in places like After Dark didn't interest human law enforcement. Or maybe they were just afraid to get involved.

Intrigued, despite her desire to get on with her search and rescue mission, she reached out and tilted the badge so she could read the words by the reflection of the halogen lamppost in the club's blacked-out front window. "Maxwell Hart. Vampire investigator?" The thought struck her funny, but she caught herself before laughing. "What exactly is that?"

"We work for the vampire king. One of our functions is to keep the vampire and human worlds as separate as possible. Feeders are welcome at the clubs, but not drop--ins. Our world isn't a tourist attraction."

Erica gave him a long, appraising look. He sounded like a cop. "I couldn't agree with you more, Mr. Hart."

"Then what were you doing in the club when you clearly had no intention of becoming a feeder?"

Knight protector. Wouldn't it be nice? Erica cocked her head and pursed her lips. If she'd known vampire investigators existed, she might have called one before she went trolling the bars for Elena.

"I'm looking for my sister." It killed her to admit it. She hated for anyone to know about her problems with Elena because in her twin's shortcomings, Erica saw her own weaknesses.

"Is your sister a feeder?" Hart asked. He shifted his weight and reached into his pants pocket. Erica rolled her eyes when he pulled out a notebook, the kind with the matching pen attached in an elastic loop.

"I don't need your services, Mr. Hart. I can find her myself."

"She's a feeder?" He wasn't going to give up.

"No ... I don't know. I certainly hope not. She asked me to meet her at a bar, but I couldn't make out the name. I came here because it's closest to her apartment." Her last known address, anyway. Elena didn't stay in one place for long, but she never ranged far enough from Erica to be truly independent, either.

"What's your name?"

"Elena. Her name is Elena Talbot ... but--"

"Your name."

Erica looked up. His eyes drew her in. If he were human, he'd have been her type. The crisp shirt, the loose tie, broad shoulders--she fantasized about men like this. The repressed executive type turned her on--proper and polite on the surface, a wild man underneath. That was another thing she kept to herself.

"My name?"

He nodded, and a faint smile played around his lips. She couldn't help but feel like he had her right where he wanted her.

"It's not important, Mr. Hart. My sister's not here. I've obviously got the wrong place so I'm just going to go home and call her tomorrow."

"If your sister's not a feeder, why would she come to a vampire bar?"

"I have no idea."

One of his dark eyebrows rose. "Do you think she might be a vampire killer?"

Erica frowned. "My sister is a lot of things, but she's not a killer."

"No, of course not. I'm sure she wouldn't hurt a fly. But vampires--we're a little different. We're dead already, so we don't really matter." The bitter edge to his words surprised her.

"She's not a vampire killer."

"There's good money in it."

"What makes you think she needs money?"

He shrugged. "Some people do it just because they like it."

"Mr. Hart--" Erica turned away, but he touched her arm and the contact singed her. How could a vampire's touch be so hot? She looked at the spot where his fingers rested gently on her arm.

"I'm sorry ... Ms?"

"Talbot. Erica."

"Ms. Talbot. I'm just doing my job. There have been a lot of vampire murders recently, and when someone comes into a club, like you did tonight, just to scope the place out, you have to understand, it looks suspicious."

"My sister is not involved in anything like that, Mr. Hart. I know that much. She's easily ... led. She may have decided to become a feeder, in which case, I'd like to stop her. No offense, but I don't want to see her become a vampire."

"We don't normally turn our feeders, Ms. Talbot. It's not economical."

"Well, that's good to know."

"We don't force our feeders either, as a rule. So if she's hanging out at a bar, it's probably her choice."

"Then why did she ask for my help?" Maybe because she always asks for my help? "She wants me to find her, Mr. Hart, and I intend to do that."

He seemed to approve of that. He folded the notebook and the wallet and returned them to his pocket. Erica followed the movement then looked away quickly, ashamed by her interest in points below his belt buckle.

"Why don't you let me help you, Ms. Talbot? If your sister is in one of the bars or the clubs or a vampire compound, you won't be able to go strolling in for a look around. I could do it for you."

"For a reasonable price, I assume?"

He laughed and she liked the sound, as well as the smile that accompanied it. "No. I'm a public servant, ma'am. I'm on the government

payroll."

"The government hires vampire investigators now?" That was a shocker considering the extreme right wing conservative administration these days. She'd have expected vampire killers on the payroll, not vampire cops.

"The vampire government," Hart corrected. "Contrary to what you might think, part of our job is protecting humans."

She didn't believe that. But still, the prospect of having a little help seemed, to borrow his word, economical.

"All right, Mr. Hart. I'd appreciate your help. The next place on my list is called Danger--Danger, unless you know a club that's closer."

Hart's smile faded. "I'm not taking you with me, Ms. Talbot. Like I told you, a human can't just go into these places unless you're a feeder. That's what these bars are for. It's not like in the old movies where we stalk some virginal society girl and fly into her window on bat wings in the middle of the night. We invite our feeders to come to us. If you give me a description of your sister, and preferably something of hers, like a piece of clothing, something that would have her scent on it, I'll do a thorough investigation."

"Her scent?" Erica pictured Hart leading a yapping pack of bloodhounds. His sardonic look erased the image instantly, and she blushed.

"Our senses are much more acute than a human's. Even if I didn't know what she looked like, I could find her by her scent."

"Ah ... well, either way, Mr. Hart, I want to go with you. Elena needs me. She'll be afraid if she thinks a vampire is stalking her. She needs to know I'm coming to help her."

Hart shook his head. "Not a good idea."

"I'll go with or without you. If I have to break into the clubs myself."

"You'll get hurt. Frank was lenient on you tonight. I've seen girls limp out of After Dark after pulling what you pulled tonight. I've seen some crawl out." He leaned close, and Erica's heart jumped when his breath warmed the skin of her neck. "Some had to be carried out."

Erica swallowed. "Then I'll just have to rely on my knight protector to keep me safe, won't I?"

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Chapter Three

Max slid into the driver's seat of his car and tapped the steering wheel in an attempt to keep focused while the woman slithered into the passenger seat in her skin-tight skirt.

The whole set-up was wrong. So wrong. He had to be out of his mind to agree to take her with him anywhere. She had no idea what she was getting into, and he had an unpleasant hollow in his gut that told him he didn't either.

He'd handled missing person cases before. Young girls left home all the time hoping to mix it up with vampires. That's why the clubs had rules. No one under age. No one on drugs or drunk when they arrived. Of course, what they got into afterward was up to them.

He liked his job, and he didn't mind that part of it was to keep humans from doing things they didn't really want to do. What bothered him most was the way they looked at him. Even this woman--Erica. She thought he was just a vampire. A monster. He saw it in her eyes. And there, with the keen intelligence and that sweet vulnerability you just didn't see in a woman once she'd been turned, was the fear. What he hated most was that it still got to him, even after one hundred and seventeen years.

Her scent was already familiar to him. She hadn't doused herself in the artificial pheromones humans used to disguise their natural scent. She looked like a feeder, underdressed and over made-up, but she smelled like ... a librarian. She had a faint aroma of books and ink and female musk enhanced by the sharp flavor of a natural soap. Just like all the others, she had no idea it wasn't the sexy outfit that drew a buyer at the bar, it was the right scent.

Of course, the shimmering stockings on those mile-long legs, the push-up bra that gave her an artfully rounded cleavage and the wisps of golden hair that tickled the naked skin of her neck, would certainly have drawn any male vampire's attention and probably a few females, too. But it was her scent that had brought Max across the surging tide of dancers to find her at the bar.

If she'd been a feeder, he'd have bought her.

Maybe the hollow in his gut was hunger rather than self-doubt. He'd figure out which later on.

"I'm not going to take you to Danger--Danger. You're not ready for that. We'll start out at Club Dead. It's a little more upscale, not as loud. If your sister's there, we should be able to locate her pretty quickly."

"Fine. I want to hit as many places as we can tonight," she said as she clicked her seatbelt in place. He watched her out of the corner of his eye as he guided the car out of the parking lot. A block later they were back in human territory and surrounded by late night traffic.

"You have to prepare for some of these places. I'll take you to the lighter ones, where I usually make my rounds on the weekends. Some of the

places, even I need a reason to go into. I can't just show up and flash my badge."

"Why not?" Her curiosity amused him and annoyed him at the same time. "If you're investigating--"

"Even human cops need warrants. They can't just barge in anywhere. Some of these clubs are private estates, and what goes on there usually isn't subject to investigation. They have their own security staff, and sometimes they work with us. Sometimes they don't."

"So some vampires don't have to follow the rules?"

"It's the same with humans sometimes, isn't it? We have our own way of dealing with the troublemakers. Don't become a troublemaker." He punctuated his subtle warning with a half-grin.

She nodded, but he saw the wheels turning. She wasn't going to be deterred. That made her dangerous to herself and to him.

"You have to trust me on this. I know what I'm talking about. If you want to help your sister, and if she really is in some kind of trouble, you've got to be careful how you go about things. Even in a regular bar, you're not going to just waltz in, grab her by the hand and waltz back out. If someone owns her ..."

Max winced as soon as he said it. He gripped the steering wheel tighter during the outburst that followed.

"No one owns my sister! She's not some slave to a vampire. I know that!"

"No. You don't." He shot her a cautious look. With her chin up and her vibrant lower lip caught in her teeth, she looked tough and sexy.

"I don't think you know anything about vampire society, and if your sister is in trouble and she got into something that she wants out of, she probably didn't know anything either."

She sighed angrily. "Then why don't you explain it to me?"

She probably didn't really want to know. "A lot of times, feeders relinquish control to their vampires. Some want to be turned so they do whatever they're asked to in exchange for a chance at immortality." The words left a sour taste. It wasn't a subject he liked to talk about. He wasn't proud of some of the promises he'd made when the gnawing hunger robbed him of his reasoning ability. He'd learned his lesson well--never go too long without feeding--never to act human for so long that he forgot what he was.

"You think she's selling her soul?" Her pretty voice became a croak. The smell of fear momentarily overpowered her enticing scent.

"I hope we can get to her before that happens. But I want to warn you, you're going to see things you won't like, and if you want to get inside, you've got to pretend it doesn't bother you. Are you willing to do that? If not, I will take you home right now, and I'll conduct the investigation by myself ... which is how I'd prefer to do it anyway."

"No."

He tapped the break pedal. Was she really smart enough to back off now while she still could?

"No?"

"No. I'm going to find Elena. I'll do what I have to. I can't let her turn herself into a vampire."

Max laughed, but there was no humor in it. "It takes two to make a vampire."

"Whatever. Look, it's not something I like to talk about, but Elena drinks too much. She does drugs sometimes. She likes men who mistreat her. In my opinion, all those things can be cured--with the right kind of help. But there's no cure for 'vampire' .... right?"

He smirked. He'd looked for one, in the beginning, when he thought he'd go mad from the craving for blood. "None that I know of. Except for death. That cures the condition pretty quickly."

"Then I've got to stop her. Even if it's what she thinks she wants."

"All right. Then you have to do exactly as I say when we're inside. Do you understand?"

She nodded and he just knew she didn't understand. Not completely. They were going to hit a rocky road. It was just a matter of time.

* * * *

Erica shivered as she got out of Max's car. She already didn't like the way things were going, but she didn't see a choice but to go along with him. The things he'd told her to expect inside Club Dead made her skin crawl just a little. The last thing Erica had the stomach for was anything deviant. Elena had told her stories about aberrant human behavior that still kept her awake some nights. She couldn't imagine what a glimpse of vampire life would do to her, but she couldn't back out now.

She waited while Max came around the car. He took her hand and pulled her toward the side of the building, which, from the outside, looked very similar to After Dark. The place was nondescript with darkened windows and no glowing marquis like human clubs boasted. She didn't hear any music coming from within this time, which surprised her. She expected the place to be loud and obnoxious just like After Dark.

"Don't we get to go in the front this time?" she asked as he herded her around the corner of the building. Another car pulled into the parking lot just then and Hart shielded her from view, stopping in front of her.

She looked up into his face and stifled a scream. His fangs were showing.

"What the--"

"I promise it won't hurt."

He pulled her to him in a swift movement that caught her off balance. She stumbled forward, putting her hands up against his chest to brace herself.

She struggled against his iron grip as his arms came around her and trapped her against him. Fear stole her breath, and the bloodcurdling scream she planned came out as an impotent squeak.

Her knees buckled when the needle sharp points of his incisors pierced her neck.

But it didn't hurt.

When he set her back on her feet, she wobbled a little and he steadied her. "I'm sorry about that."

"What did you--" She swiped her hand over the spot, still oddly warm from the pressure of his lips. Bright red blood covered her fingers.

"I marked you as mine."

The words sent a wanton pulse to the suddenly wet spot between her legs. Those were the sexiest words she'd ever heard.

She slapped him.

"You can't just go around biting people!" The sudden adrenaline rush cleared her head a little, and she realized how absurd she sounded.

Max rubbed the left side of his jaw and grinned. The humor in his eyes didn't completely mask the dangerous hint of lust Erica saw there. How could what just happened have turned them both on?

"I don't go around biting people. I marked you. I didn't drink any. I just broke the skin so it looks like I've been feeding from you."

Erica stared at her bloody fingertips for a second before Max handed her a folded handkerchief from his back pocket. She wiped her hands and dabbed at the still tingling spot on her neck. "You could have warned me."

"You'd have said no, and we'd be out here arguing about it until daybreak."

True. If he'd asked permission to bite her, she would have refused. Biting was ... unsanitary at best. The fact that she liked it--no. She didn't like it. That was ridiculous. She'd been scared out of her mind, limp with terror, unable to scream. She didn't like that feeling at all. Absolutely not. She mentally reserved the right to slap him again later just for good measure. For now, she had to find Elena.

"Anything else I should know before we go in?" She straightened her skirt and fluffed her hair in a vain attempt to recapture some of her dignity. She'd never gone limp in a man's arms before--ever. Frankly, it was embarrassing.

"One thing ..." His wicked smile did something to the muscles just below her navel. "You taste great."

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Chapter Four

Max waited until the occupants of the other car entered the club before he led Erica around to the front of the building. He stopped with his hand on the curving handle of the front door and gave her a hard look. “Last chance to back out.”

“Open the door.”

Her response didn’t surprise him. What did, however, was that he found her tough act endearing. She definitely had courage. Maybe on someone else he would have called it unbridled stupidity, but on her it worked. The quiet desperation in her eyes touched a long-neglected chord in him and he decided, despite his better judgment, that she just might be smart enough to play it cool.

He opened the door, and they entered the sultry atmosphere of Club Dead.

Inside, Melinda, the Friday-night hostess, sat on a four-foot high stool next to the inner door. Her skinny legs, sheathed in black stockings, twined around each other, and she balanced a narrow leather guest book in her lap. The vampiress smiled at him, showing off her newly sharpened fangs.

“Max! You look great, as always. Who’s this? Someone new?” There was just a hint of ferocity in the look she gave Erica. That had nothing to do with Max. Melinda barely tolerated human women. She preferred to feed from males.

“This is--”

“Ricki,” Erica blurted the pseudonym, drawing a frown from Melinda. “Hi.”

Max yanked her arm, hard. “That’s enough talk.” He smiled apologetically at Melinda. “She’s very new.”

The hostess nodded, but disapproval colored her pale features. “Table for two?”

“Yes.”

“Go on in.” Melinda touched a button on the wall behind her. The inner doors opened, and she ushered them deeper into the club.

Max felt Erica stiffen as he pulled her inside the darkened interior where black lights illuminated the carefully painted décor. It looked like a neon garden. Here and there spotlights shone on couples and triples engaged in everything from quiet conversation to blatantly sexual feeding frenzies.

He tugged again, and Erica stumbled after him. “Keep walking,” he said in his most severe tone.

“I think you--” He cut off her protest with a fang-bearing sneer then splayed his fingers over the bite mark on her neck where he applied just enough pressure to cause discomfort.

“Remember what we discussed. In here, you do everything I say,

when I say it. If you have a problem with the way I treat you, we'll discuss it when the evening is over."

He saw her swallow another sharp remark. To her credit, she broke eye contact first, dropping her gaze in nearly perfect subservience.

"Let's get to our table. I'm thirsty." He pulled her gently this time, and she kept up with his pace as he made his way through the club to the very back where the B-list patrons got to sit. Once there, he guided her to a chair and then pulled his own as close to hers as possible. Under the table, he put one hand on her exposed knee and squeezed then slid his thumb up beneath the taut strap of her garter.

"Those shoes are too high for you. The next time we go out, wear something more comfortable. I don't want you stumbling all over the place."

She nodded, and he squeezed her thigh in approval.

With his index finger he traced a line down her jaw and into the collar of her blouse. He gently pushed the material aside, exposing one thin strap of her bra, which he nudged off the curve of her shoulder. "That's better. Now, I'm going to tell you, in detail everything I'm going to do to you tonight, do you understand?"

Again she nodded, and again he squeezed.

"First I'm going to order you a drink. Then I'm going to teach you everything you need to know about being a feeder ... one delicious drop at a time."

* * * *

Erica fought to steady her breathing as Max caressed her thigh beneath the table. The thud of her own wild pulse drowned out much of what he was saying, which was a good thing, because her cognitive skills had bottomed out the moment they walked inside.

The humid atmosphere had surprised her at first. She hadn't expected a tropical feel to the place, and if that had been the only shock, she would have been fine.

When her eyes adjusted to the black light she saw the neon splotches of color that dripped from the walls, puddled on the floor and ran in rivulets across the tables and chairs. The décor didn't shock her as much as the patrons, though.

The first couple that had come into view as they entered the club seemed perfectly normal. Seated at a small table, their half-finished meal before them, the man pulled the woman to him in a romantic embrace. Her eyes widened when he bit into her neck, and Erica imagined she heard the rush of blood as he suckled. The woman moaned in carnal pleasure, and her eyes lit on Erica's for a brief moment. Her short dark hair and thin white shoulders looked achingly familiar, causing Erica's heart to pump an overdose of adrenaline into her system. By the time her brain registered that the woman

was not Elena, her head was pounding in time to her heartbeat, and her legs had begun to tremble.

At the next table they passed, a woman sat on her knees at the feet of a sedate looking man in an Armani suit. Another woman sat on his lap, leaning back against his chest as he drank from her and caressed her breasts through the nearly transparent fabric of her blouse. Erica stared at the thin, glittering chain that connected the woman on the floor to the woman on the man's lap by leather cuffs on their wrists.

She might have left then, but she realized she needed to sit down more than she needed to flee.

With her hands on the cool surface of the table, she concentrated on maintaining control. She'd never felt like this before and she wondered if the sensations were akin to a drug-induced high. Twinges of electrical current raced up and down her spine with detours to the sensitive flesh beneath Max's thumb. With her pulse racing and the humid air dampening her skin, she felt close to having a heart attack.

When a waitress finally brought the drink Max had ordered for her, she reached for the glass and gulped. Only after she'd drained it halfway did she realize there was little, if any, alcohol in it. She set the glass down with trembling fingers.

"Are you all right?" His voice seemed normal when he whispered in her ear. Before, when he'd been giving her orders, he sounded commanding in a way that should have made her angry and insulted. The fact that it made her tremble with forbidden desires frightened her and made her feel slightly shameful.

"I'm fine. I don't see Elena."

"This isn't the whole club. What we're going to have to do is wait a little while, then on our way out take a walk through the grotto in the back."

"There's something farther back than this lousy table?" She felt suddenly brave, giddy in fact. She wondered what exactly was in the drink.

He laughed. "There's another room around the corner there." He pointed to a spot where slashes of orange neon paint converged in a caricature of a couple in a fevered embrace.

Erica felt a jolt of anticipation at what might be back there, and the still-coherent part of her brain reigned in the aberrant impulse. All she wanted was to find Elena and get out of here, get away from Max Hart and go back to her normal human life. At least, that should have been all she wanted.

She concentrated on keeping her hands steady as she lifted her glass for another sip. "Drink it slowly," Max said.

"What ... what's in it?"

"Just scotch and soda."

There had to be something other than alcohol. Only a drug could explain the way she felt. Her eyes drifted back to the threesome, just barely visible in the dimness. The woman on the floor began unbuttoning her blouse

and while Erica stared, she rose and switched places with the other. When the man bit into her flesh, Erica looked away.

"Why do they do that in public?" she asked under her breath. She bit her lip as the waitress sauntered by with a tray of drinks and prayed no one but Max heard her question. His response was to inch his fingers a little higher up her thigh.

"Careful. Keep your voice down." He dipped his finger in the cool amber liquid in her glass and brought it to Erica's lips. "Lick."

She hesitated only a second. Some unknown force made her desperate to obey him, and she captured the shimmering drop on the tip of her tongue.

"You'll think this is amusing, but it's a privacy issue. Many vampires lead human lives. They maintain homes in town, hold down jobs. A very small percentage even have families...."

"How--" Erica's question died on her lips when Max dug his fingertips into her leg.

"Shhh. I'll answer all your questions. As I was saying, they have friends and family who may not know they're vampires. It's a difficult existence. They come here to feed without fear of being seen by someone who doesn't know what they really are. They can be free here. Not everyone comes to the bars. Some find feeders other ways and are able to feed privately. I'd say most of us envy them."

Erica lifted her glass, but her mind was on the position of Max's hand. She wondered if he felt the moisture on her inner thigh. She wanted to move and relieve the sudden pressure between her legs, but that would only draw his fingers higher.

"And yes, some vampires have families. No, we can't procreate. But some were turned after they had spouses and children. There aren't many. It's a terrible burden, to know you won't die--a natural death anyway--and your children will grow old while you remain young."

Erica nodded. The pang of sympathy she felt concerned her. Why would the plight of a vampire affect her? How could she have spent more than a minute thinking of something other than Elena?

"You need to relax," Max said, dipping his head close to her neck again. "Your muscles are like bowstrings. Take a breath."

She tried to comply but a nervous giggle threatened. "What's in the drink?"

"Nothing really."

"Come on."

"What would you like me to tell you? That I drugged you so that you'll be compliant later? So you'll lie still while I undress you and explore your body until I find the perfect spot to sink my teeth into?"

Erica looked up at the swirls of neon pink on the ceiling. Her nerve endings were on fire. She should have gotten up and walked out--run out. But all she could think of was how much she wanted him to do just as he

described.

Oh God. This can't be happening. I'm not hot for a vampire. I'm not.

"Finish your drink. It's time to take a walk."

This time Erica had no luck keeping her hands from shaking. Her drink sloshed a little, and a drop landed on the table. Max glanced up sharply as the remaining ice cubes clinked together like old bones. "Take it easy."

He touched his finger to the glistening drop on the table then touched the spot just above her exposed collarbone. The cold jolted her, shot an arrow of fire to her core. Involuntarily she arched her back when he brought his head down and licked the spot where he'd just dabbed her skin. The small sound she made in the back of her throat surprised them both.

"Right there. That's a good spot. I can drink from there and you can hide it under your clothes during the day, but you'll know it's there. Every time you see the mark, you'll remember I was there."

"What are you trying to--"

"Let's go, now." Again he cut her off. He withdrew his hand from her leg slowly, trailing each finger from her aching flesh one at a time, leaving her breathless.

He left a folded bill on the table and pulled her to her feet. "Can you walk?"

"Of course," she said with confidence she didn't feel. In the time they'd been sitting, she'd forgotten how to walk, how to talk, how to do anything other than exactly what he told her to do. Her body rebelled with a dizzy rush and she swayed.

He caught her around the waist and righted her, tucking her against his side in a possessive embrace. "You're doing fine. But you'll need to learn some discipline. I'm looking forward to teaching you all you need to know."

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Chapter Five

Club Dead's grotto was no place for Erica. Not in the state she was in at the moment, anyway. Max felt her shaking as he walked her slowly through the narrow corridor that led to the club's infamous back room. If he could have left her out front, he would have, but the way she smelled right now, no vamp in the place would be able to resist her.

The act he'd put on for the benefit of Club Dead's staff and patrons had been a good one. From the delicious scent of arousal on her skin, Max could tell it certainly worked on Erica. That surprised him. At some point she'd transformed from a frightened, naturally defiant ice princess, into the kind of submissive feeder for which the average vampire would pay double the going rate. The way she'd taken his instructions, and the way she'd licked her lips when she watched the couples at the other tables made him hungry and hard.

It wouldn't be easy to shake it off and keep his needs in check until he got her home--and left her there. He'd not only need to feed tonight, he'd need to sate his sexual desires, too. If he hadn't been working, he'd have insisted they forget the grotto and go back to his apartment. Max was fortunate in that most of his neighbors thought he was human and it didn't matter to him if they saw him bring women home. They would assume just what he wanted them too, that he was a bachelor with a lot of dates. The fact that he rarely brought the same woman home twice, was none of their concern.

As he guided Erica down the hallway and into the grotto where a low, insistent beat and the sound of gurgling fountains competed with moans and gasps of pleasure, he reviewed a list of feeders he could call on to provide more than just a fix for his hunger. He refused to acknowledge the fact that none of them would satisfy him completely. He didn't just want blood and sex. He wanted Erica, and that was bad news.

"What are they--" He cut off her query by squeezing her shoulder. When would she learn not to talk so much?

"They're all feeding. There are lots of ways to feed. We'll try them all, eventually." The darker voice he adopted in the clubs reminded him of the early days when he roamed the streets of London doing as he pleased. Such a long time ago, after he'd gotten over the shock of being turned. He didn't miss those times. The loneliness had nearly destroyed him.

Things were better here in the States where vampire infrastructure had taken root so quickly over the last half century. Of course, in Europe, his kind commanded more respect from humans, but garnered more fear as well. There, he was still considered a monster. Here, he was ... something else--a member of a shadow society. A curiosity. Most people who knew vampires existed preferred to pretend they didn't. Whether that was better or worse than being feared, he hadn't decided.

The back room of Club Dead had been set up to resemble a city park, with artificial trees and bushes, benches and rocks, dimly lit lamp posts and bubbling fountains, some of which oozed cool carbon dioxide mist across the floor. As they moved through the setting, he gently turned Erica so that she could see each scene as it took place.

He hoped she didn't identify her sister in one of the alcoves. If Elena Talbot was here, lying naked in the arms of a vampire lover, Max wasn't sure how he'd get her out without getting both he and Erica ripped to shreds. They'd have to stake out the door, no pun intended, and wait until Elena left.

Times like this, Max was grateful his heart didn't beat anymore. The adrenaline pumping through his system would have choked him. As it was, he smelled the sharp scents of excitement, fear and desire all around him, but most strongly from Erica. It rolled off her in waves that teased his heightened senses unmercifully. Why hadn't he listened to his inner voice when it shouted at him that this was a bad idea? Was it because he'd been attracted to Erica immediately? Was it because he didn't want to send her back to her safe human world where she belonged if there was the slightest chance he might entice her to spend some time in his?

When she stopped mid-step he tensed. "What is it?" he whispered next to her ear.

She didn't respond. In the alcove before them, a female vampire stood naked and chained to the faux lamppost, her thin arms stretched high above her head. A human male knelt at her feet working to fasten leather cuffs at her ankles. She writhed under the ministrations of a second human male who flogged her thighs with a leather strap.

Max tried to pull Erica along but she stood frozen, her lips parted and her pulse racing.

When the vampiress noticed her audience she bared her fangs and smiled. With a tilt of her head she extended an invitation to join in.

Erica shuddered against Max, and he tightened his grip on her waist. He shook his head slowly and showed his fangs, which seemed to satisfy the female. She shrugged her disappointment and turned her attention back to her own pleasure.

Max and Erica moved on to the next alcove where two male vampires fed from a human female. She lay spread-eagled on a flat rock, her eyes wide and her mouth slack. One vampire drank from her neck as he caressed her breasts through the thin fabric of her silk blouse. The other drank from her inner thigh, one hand hidden in the folds of her short, black skirt. The woman moaned and bucked against his hand.

"Do you see Elena?" Max rasped as he pulled Erica forward toward the exit. If he didn't get her out of here soon, they'd end up in one of the empty alcoves.

"No ..."

"Good. It's time to go."

* * * *

The cool night air shocked Erica's senses after the sultry heat of the club. She drew in a deep cleansing breath and broke from Max's grasp as the back door clicked shut behind them.

She didn't dare look at him right now. After what she'd seen inside, and the way it made her feel, she couldn't face him just yet.

With her arms wrapped around her stomach, she doubled over and stared at the pockmarked surface of the parking lot between her feet. A few more breaths, and she'd regain control, settle the raging river in her blood and start to feel like herself again. She hoped.

"I told you." His voice reached her from a few feet away. When she peered up at him she saw only his back. A fresh wave of shame washed over her when she realized he couldn't look at her either.

"I'll be all right. Give me a minute."

"It's time I took you home."

She shook her head. "It's only 4:00 a.m. I want to go to another club."

"Sunrise is at 5:03 today. The bars are closing now."

She shook her head, hiding a faint smile as she pulled her hair down from the tight band that held it off her neck. "Of course you know exactly what time sunrise is."

"Did you bring a car to After Dark?" he asked, ignoring her comment. She wondered if it offended him to be reminded of the limitations of his kind.

"I walked from the bus stop on Dwight Avenue. I was concerned someone might trace my plates if they saw my car in the lot."

Now Max turned and met her gaze. For a brief moment she thought she saw admiration in his eyes.

"Who are you hiding from?"

"I ... have a conservative life." Perhaps that was an overstatement. 'Life' was too strong a word to describe what Erica had. By day, a stoic, proper insurance claims adjuster, filling out complicated forms in triplicate. By night, more often than not, Elena's keeper. There was nothing in between. She hadn't had time for friends in months, didn't have the energy to make up lies about Elena anymore. She kept her coworkers and neighbors at a polite distance to isolate herself--though she wasn't quite sure from what.

"By vampire standards, so do I." Max smirked again.

"You seemed pretty comfortable in there." She regretted that her statement sounded like an accusation. He didn't seem to notice, though.

"I swing by now and then to keep an eye on things, but that's not where I feed. It's just part of my job."

"They all have jobs, too, don't they? Like regular ... like humans?"

He nodded. "Most of them. The nights can be long and boring. We've all got to do something. Come on. Let me take you home."

Erica straightened and followed Max toward his car. Though her stomach had calmed, a slight tremor played at the back of her jaw, and the giddiness hadn't dissipated completely. When she slid into the cool leather passenger seat, she sank back and let the kinks in her spine work themselves out.

"Why?" she asked as he started the engine and backed out of the parking space. She noticed other cars queuing up to leave the club as well.

"Why what?" He glanced at her, and then deliberately looked away as he guided the car through the white painted posts that stood guard at the lot entrance.

"Why everything? Why are they like that? What was in that drink? Why do humans allow themselves ... ?"

"It's a complex symbiotic relationship." Max smirked as he spoke. The line was obviously well rehearsed. "It took centuries for us to come to terms with our true need for humans. Most of us don't think of you as enemies anymore and fortunately for us, there are more and more of you who don't think of us as enemies, either. But on the other side of the coin, years ago no one became a vampire by choice. Turning someone was the closest thing to procreation we could do. And there was the idea that if vampires outnumbered humans, the world might be a safer place for us."

Erica closed her eyes, torn between wanting to absorb what Max told her and understand it, and wanting to drown it all out and forget everything. She had so many more questions but she was afraid of the answers.

"Where do you live?" His question diverted her thoughts from the dark places where she didn't want to dwell.

"On Rochester Drive in the apartments at 101." She answered him easily and regretted it. She should have given him Elena's address and caught a cab from there, but if she had to walk another block in her heels, she'd have collapsed. Her legs ached, and she indulged in the fantasy of asking Max to massage them for her when they reached her apartment.

Replaying flashes of the evening in her mind, Erica found herself alternately aroused and disgusted, enticed and ashamed. Whatever spell she'd been under in the bar, she could not have been completely in control.

"The drink ..."

"There was nothing in it. Honest."

She still didn't believe him. Out of the corner of her eye she regarded his handsome profile. A muscle at the back of his jaw twitched. He's hiding something, she decided.

"Right here," she said a while later when her building came into view. "You can pull up over there."

Max stopped the car and turned to her. The look he gave her made her heart pump a little faster.

"Erica," he said her name slowly, his voice low and smooth. "I don't want to put you through any more of this. Let me look for your sister. I'll keep

you informed of what I find."

Disappointment surged through her, and she glanced away. Why had she been hoping he was about to kiss her?

He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out his business card. A phone and fax number were embossed below his name in small black letters.

"Call me with any information you have, and like I said, if you can give me something of your sister's that I can trace ..."

Erica bit her lower lip and nodded. "I will. I'll go to her apartment tomorrow and get something. But, I'm not giving up, Mr. Hart. I'm going to keep looking for her myself. I can't just sit around and wait."

"Erica ..."

"No. The things I saw tonight." The things I did. "I can't bear to think of Elena involved in that."

"It still may be her choice."

"No. I don't believe that. I'm not saying there aren't people who ..." Like it? Find it arousing? She refused to think about how aroused she was at the moment. "It's just not Elena." Who was she trying to fool? She wrenched the door handle and stomped one foot onto the curb.

When he grabbed her wrist, she pulled back halfheartedly, but he didn't relinquish his grasp. His gaze was hard, like it had been inside Club Dead when he admonished her, when he commanded her. It killed her that her body responded to the authority in his voice.

"If you insist on looking for her yourself, then I'll take you. You have to understand that there are places you just can't go alone. In order to keep their secrets, there are vampires that will hurt you. You need someone to protect you."

"I thought we'd been through this already, Mr. Hart. If you want to do that, that's fine. I'll go along with your investigation--only as long as I'm part of it. If Elena thinks that you're a cop or that I've hired you to find her, she'll make herself harder to reach. She'll withdraw and I won't ever be able to help her."

"How far are you willing to go to find her?"

Erica met his gaze and held it as she disengaged her wrist from his grasp. "All the way."

"I don't think you know what that means."

"Then show me."

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Chapter Six

Max's growing hunger surged at Erica's invitation. What he wouldn't give to truly show her everything he sensed she wanted to know about his world. Right now, with her eyes flashing, and the scent of defiance mixing with the aroma of her own arousal, she was everything he wanted--and nothing he dared take.

Her conflicting reactions at the club had told him much more than she ever would have. Truly drawing her into his world, maybe even into his life, would destroy everything about her that made her so irresistible.

He wrenched his gaze away from her and tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

"I'll do what I can." He choked out the words. "Tomorrow I'll put out some feelers and let some of my contacts know that I'm looking for someone. I'll see if I can get reservations at some of the other more private clubs, and I'll pick you up." What was he saying? Pick her up? Take her with him? He should have pushed her out of the car and driven away as fast as he could. The playacting tonight was just that. It wasn't real. Her arousal--his own--were just illusions. Her fear and her naiveté made her seem, just for a moment, like she was giving herself over to something she wanted but was afraid to admit to herself. He would have given anything to see that happen, to watch her discover that part of herself she so obviously denied. He was kidding himself. When she'd obeyed his command to lick a drop of her drink from his fingertip, he'd caught the most alluring glimpse of something wanton in her eyes.

Then it was gone.

The challenge she'd just issued to him was no more than a schoolyard taunt. She thought she could handle it, but she had no idea.

"I'll come a little early," he continued, pushing his doubts to the side. "And we'll go over a few more rules. You did well tonight, but tomorrow we'll be in places where vampires don't take new feeders. You're going to have to act like you're used to this world."

She nodded. Something tightened in his groin at the thought that she might be eager to learn more.

"Wear something ... different." He resisted the urge to touch the fabric of her blouse. "Elegant. Preferably black. No jewelry, no perfume."

"Lower heels?" The hint of amusement in her tone disarmed him. If he hadn't been fighting so hard to hold it together, he'd have taken her right then.

"Yes. And ... I'll have to bite you again. Just a little." Would a little be enough? Could he stop again at the smallest taste? Her flavor lingered on his tongue still, and the memory threatened to drive him mad. He'd have to make sure he fed well tonight.

"As long as it won't hurt."

"It won't hurt," he assured her as she climbed out of the car. At least it won't hurt you.

* * * *

Erica left her clothes in a pile on the bathroom floor and stepped into the steaming spray of the shower. Hot needles of water dug into her flesh from the massaging showerhead, and the glorious sensation made her sigh.

The tension that had built in her muscles since the moment she'd laid eyes on Maxwell Hart finally loosened and drained away. In its place a weakness washed over her that frightened her.

She leaned against the cool tiles and gulped the humid air. What had she gotten herself into?

* * * *

Her scent lingered in the car. Max opened the windows and picked up speed to keep the cool air in his face. He had half an hour until daybreak, and he had to feed soon or he'd end up back at Erica's apartment. He couldn't go back to After Dark. At this hour, Kyra was his only option.

A quick detour to the highway brought him to her development. At 4:45 he knocked on her door.

He sighed heavily and sidled through the door when she appeared. "I need you." He hated taking advantage of her like this, but her seductive smile told him she didn't mind.

Once inside he leaned against the door and took in her familiar scent. The place looked the same as always: clothes and Chinese takeout containers littered every available surface. Under the layer of flotsam, her new furniture looked worn and outdated. A red jar candle flickered on the mantle where a picture lay face down. Max detected the aroma of cinnamon overlaying the lingering essence of moo goo gai pan.

With a sigh, he followed her to the bedroom of the bungalow, his eyes on the faint remnants of the mark he'd left on her neck a week ago. She shrugged off her robe as she walked, leaving the flowered silk on the floor next to the bed.

"Where've you been tonight, Max? You look so tired." He normally found the sensual purr of her voice soothing, but tonight he wished for silence. Kyra wasn't the submissive type, and if he ordered her to be quiet while he took what he wanted, she'd kick him out. He used to like her independent streak.

"I'm working a new case." He bit the words out as he folded her slim body into his arms. He used to like the feel of her against him too, but tonight she felt fleshless. She made comforting sounds as he sank his incisors into her

skin. The warmth of her eased the cold hollow inside him somewhat, and as he drank, he waited for the bloodlust to take him. He needed that release too, but oddly, aside from lessening his hunger, he felt nothing. The hard-on he'd been battling since the moment he'd tasted Erica began to subside as he took his fill.

When he finished, Kyra threw herself back on the bed, ready for what usually came next. She held her arms out to him and smiled. "Come on ... let Kyra make it all better."

He glanced at the bedroom window where a black shade hung ready to block out the morning light. He could stay. She'd welcome a captive vampire for the day, but if he left right now he might make it back to his place before the clouds parted and the damning daylight took over.

"I wish I had the time." He hated lying. Kyra had always been good to him. Always available when he wanted her. She'd even given up smoking after he told her how the nicotine left a bad aftertaste that most vamps didn't care for. He fished a fifty out of his wallet and handed it to her.

She pouted. "Oh come on, Max! You're going to leave me like this? What's up with you?"

Apparently nothing, at the moment, he thought wryly. That had never happened before. He often fantasized about other women when he was with Kyra but the fantasies had always helped make it hotter, harder. Tonight, Kyra's willing body seemed like a pale shadow. The taste of her blood wasn't quite as sweet as he remembered. He wanted Erica. Maybe if he pictured her, conjured her scent with his mind he could ...

"I'm tired. I've got to go. Next time, babe. I'll make it up to you."

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Chapter Seven

Erica woke just before seven after barely an hour of sleep.

Frustrated and jittery, she finally flung herself from the sweat-damp sheets and hurried into the kitchen to brew some tea. She sipped slowly, staring out her kitchen window at the building's rear parking lot. She thought of Max, his dark gaze and the way her body responded to his voice and his touch. She'd never imagined giving up control to someone else, but the thought of him subtly guiding her movements, or openly commanding her, made her knees weak. How could she find it arousing to submit to him? Why did she crave more?

She finished her tea and shook the unsettling thoughts from her mind. It was a fluke, she decided. Everyone talked about getting caught up in the moment--people did things all the time that they couldn't explain to themselves by the light of day. She'd get over it, and move on. As soon as she found Elena.

* * * *

At 6:00 p.m., Erica stood before her open closet and drew out a black dress with trembling fingers. Half a dozen times she'd picked up the phone to call Max and cancel and each time she'd taken a deep breath and steeled herself to do this.

When the doorbell rang, she smoothed her skirt and her hair, and pressed her hand tightly to her stomach to quell the butterflies. This is business, she told herself. Just business.

* * * *

This is just business, Max told himself. He'd had less trouble believing that all day while he worked from his apartment. He'd spoken to his contacts and his colleagues and circulated the details he had about Elena Talbot's disappearance. Since keeping a reluctant human from becoming a feeder was within his job description, he felt less like he was using Erica for his own perverse pleasure. The search for Elena Talbot was an official case now, so he didn't have to feel guilty about spending the evening with Erica, even if he enjoyed it.

When he rang Erica's doorbell, his professional resolve wavered. It fled entirely when she opened the door.

Just as he'd requested, she wore black. The dress was strapless and the neckline dipped just a bit between her breasts.

Her neck was bare, and now she wore her hair in a loose chignon with a few thin corkscrew curls dangling here and there, just begging to be

touched.

Demure black stockings and sharp-toed pumps with old-fashioned pedestal heels completed the look. Her makeup was understated, and she smelled like almond soap and indecision.

It occurred to him that if he made this difficult for her, he might still be able to talk her out of it.

"Can I come in?"

"Do you have to be invited?" She cocked her head, baring the pulse-point in her neck to his view.

He swallowed. "No more than anyone else."

She stepped aside, and he walked into the apartment where her scent and her taste surrounded him. The overstuffed bookshelves explained the librarian vibe he'd gotten. A stack of hardcovers sat on a low coffee table next to a sofa that begged for curling up and settling in with the latest bestseller.

He smiled. "This is nice. It's a comfortable place."

"Thank you." She seemed unsure of herself now. Despite the outfit and her determined stance, he wondered if she really had the confidence to pull it off. "Can I get you a drink?"

"I don't want anything right now, thanks. We should get started. I made reservations at 7:30 for Gregori's. It's a private club that was owned by the prior vampire king. Since he left the country it's under new management, but they kept the name."

"The vampire king owned a club? Didn't he have ... kingly duties?"

"His last duty here was to choose a new king." Max thought of Gregori Nachevik's chosen successor. Jake Beaumont's appointment as the leader of vampire society in this area had shaken the vampire world pretty badly. Things were still settling, like the aftermath of an earthquake, loose dirt filling into the cracks.

"So how does vampire royalty work? If there aren't any ... bloodlines?"

"It's sort of like a bloodline. The former king chose a successor that he turned himself, and the rules are stricter now than they used to be. We need permission from the king to turn someone." Max wished the rules had been in place a century ago, but things were different then.

"What about a queen?"

"There's no queen ... right now. Female vampires usually aren't interested in politics."

"Tell me about the club ... What's it like there?" She surprised him by taking a seat on the sofa. He watched her legs as she crossed them demurely at the ankle. Whatever had stopped working for him last night with Kyra kicked back into gear as his gaze traveled up her taut calf muscles. He forgot vampire politics and concentrated on answering her next question.

"It's elegant. The food is excellent, so I'm told."

"I don't know if it's Elena's type of place. I would have expected to

find her somewhere more like After Dark."

"Gregori's is for vampires who have regular feeders that they like to show off. If she's gotten into a 'contract' with someone, she might not be able to get out of it that easily, and that may be why she called for help. Some vampires pay their regular feeders good money for exclusivity, and they help them maintain a certain lifestyle."

Erica nodded. "I'm sorry I couldn't get you something that belongs to her. There's an eviction notice on her apartment, and the landlord wouldn't let me in unless I paid two months back rent. I can't get the money until Monday morning so ...."

Max sighed. With Elena's scent, his job would have been so much easier. "Maybe we'll get lucky and we'll find her tonight. I know I don't need to ask but, you haven't heard any more from her, have you?"

She shook her head, and the glimmer of vulnerability in her eyes clutched at him. He turned away from her and covered his own uncertainty by placing his suit jacket on a nearby chair.

When he turned back, he was in charge again, ready to teach her what she needed to know.

* * * *

"Let's go over the rules, and the consequences for breaking them," Max said as he turned. His voice sent an unexpected shiver through Erica's body, and her nipples peaked beneath the satiny fabric of her dress. Oh, God, if she felt like this now, what would happen if he touched her?

She held her breath while he unbuttoned his shirt cuffs and pushed his sleeves up. He dropped a pair of gold cuff links on the coffee table and gave her a dark look. When he loosened his tie, she arched involuntarily toward him.

"Rule number one: I'm in control at all times. Inside the club you literally belong to me. You have no purpose other than to do as you are told."

She nodded, afraid to speak, afraid that she would sound too eager to obey his commands.

"Rule two: Don't speak unless I give you permission. If someone asks you a question--they probably won't--but if they do, you look at me before answering. If I don't respond, you say nothing.

"Rule three: You never leave my side. Rule four: If you see your sister, don't react to her. Let me know, quietly, and I'll decide what to do from there. There's a chance that even if she's there, we will not be able to get to her tonight. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Erica's response came out as a breathless whisper. "Are those all the rules?"

"The major ones. Get used to doing everything I tell you. You can start now by standing up."

She complied, her eyes on him. When he moved to stand in front of her, her stomach tightened, and the tingle between her thighs intensified.

He brought up one hand and traced the healing bite marks on her neck with the tip of his finger. His feather light touch made something deep within her begin to pulse.

"This healed too quickly. It wasn't deep enough." He ran his finger over her collarbone and across the mounded flesh above the curving neckline of her dress. "There are lots of places I could leave a mark. What would be best? Maybe the other side of your neck?" He smirked and she swallowed hard. His scent was intoxicating, like a warm summer breeze with a hint of spice. She tilted her head back when he placed both hands on her hips and guided her body toward his.

"How about here?" He lowered his head and kissed the spot just below her left ear and she made a sound that could only have been one of surrender.

* * * *

Max hovered over the sweet spot on Erica's neck, lost in the fatal scent of her. Another taste would be his downfall. He wanted her even though he wasn't hungry. Kyra had sated his desire for blood. What he wanted now, he hadn't taken last night.

He told himself the scent of arousal would make Erica seem more authentic. Feeders, as a rule, enjoyed the sexual nature of the vampire symbiosis as well. It raised their internal pressure and heightened their output. Sexual excitement had the added benefit of releasing hormones into the blood that made it sweeter. With that in mind, it was practically a necessity to get her a little hot before he brought her to the club. The anticipation would show on her face in the flush of her cheeks and the swell of her breasts against her dress. He needed her in the same state she'd been in last night, needed her fighting for control so he could offer it to her.

"Turn around." He loved that she didn't question his command.

He pulled her against him, positioning her hips so she could feel his erection. He held her tight around the waist and lowered his teeth to just above her flickering pulse and bent her forward slightly.

The delicious sensation of her pushing against him brought on the bloodlust. He bit down slowly, just enough to let the blood well into a swollen drop beneath each fang. As he licked those sweet drops, he slid one hand down the front of her dress to cup the spot at the juncture of her thighs.

She pushed back father, and a moan escaped her lips. That's when he began to drink.

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Chapter Eight

Erica found the hard muscles of Max's thigh and squeezed with shaking fingers while she rubbed against his cock. His lips on her skin were like fire, his body like a wall of steel against her back.

She'd never wanted anyone so badly. It wasn't like her at all to want to surrender, and it scared her. Part of her soul that she never knew existed had burst free and was clamoring for control. She wanted him to tell her what to do so she wouldn't have to wonder.

"Please ..." she whispered finally when he drew his lips away. His teeth slide out of her skin and rather than relief that he was finished, she felt suddenly alone and without purpose. "You can take more ..." Had she really said that? Did she really want him to continue?

"No, I can't." His voice was raw.

She turned in his arms and leaned against him. "Isn't there more I need to learn?" Shame heated her cheeks at the request. She had to be losing her mind. Why did she want him to do this, to own her? She'd been an independent woman for all of her adult life. She'd spent more than a decade resisting the limits anyone else tried to impose on her, and now all she wanted was this man, this vampire she hardly knew, to claim her and command her.

He grabbed her arms and shook her once, just hard enough to remind her that giving her will over to him was a dangerous idea.

"There's a lot you need to learn. First, you don't tell me what to take. I'll take what I want." He brought one finger up and tilted her chin so she had to meet his gaze. His voice softened. "If I take everything I want from you right now, there will be nothing left, Erica. We can't play like this, not here where there's nothing stopping me from making you mine."

Lost in his blazing eyes, she couldn't respond. Somewhere in her foggy thoughts a voice cried for him to do it. She wanted him, and she hated herself for being so weak.

He let her go and she sagged a little, her breath escaping in a shuddering sigh. "This isn't me," she said finally, wishing it were true. "I'm not usually like this."

"I know. Believe me when I tell you, I don't want to change you. I don't want to turn you into exactly what you're trying to save your sister from."

Erica glanced up sharply. "I may not know you very well, but that sounded like a lie, Mr. Hart."

A smile played at the corner of his mouth as he rolled his sleeves down and retrieved his cuff-links. "You don't have to believe me, Erica. You just have to do as I say. Rule five: Call me Max."

* * * *

‘Elegant’ was too mild a word to describe Gregori’s. Like the finest human restaurants, it seemed that no expense had been spared to make the place sparkle. Chandeliers hung in the center of every room, and the ornate windows held thick beveled panes of leaded glass that captured the reflections of dozens of candles. Strings of miniature lights decorated the potted trees that lined the main entry hall and each pinpoint of light gleamed off the polished parquet floor.

When Max and Erica arrived, an attendant took their coats while the concierge checked their reservations and showed them to a table that overlooked the huge central dance floor.

Erica relaxed when Max pulled out her chair for her. She sat down and he ordered her a wine spritzer. This place catered to her more delicate sensibilities, not the part of her that had been screaming for release since Max left her wanting and wondering in her apartment.

She began to fantasize that after a sumptuous meal, she might look down and see Elena swirling across the dance floor with her escort. She’d always dreamed that one day she’d see her twin happy and healthy and free of her addictions. The beauty and charm of Gregori’s made her think it might be possible that Elena could find happiness in this world.

With a start, she admonished herself for such a foolish thought. If Elena was happy she wouldn’t have called for help. Her words were burned into Erica’s memory; I need you to help me ...

Max ordered Erica’s dinner and the authority in his voice made her feel momentarily safe. He leaned forward to speak to her after the tuxedoed waiter left them. “I put out some feelers this morning. I found out there’s some fresh blood in the upper echelons. Some of the people who work directly for the new king have been taking on extra feeders. That could be an important lead.”

“Tell me more about the old king,” Erica said under her breath. “Why did he leave?”

“He went back to Europe. It’s a better place for an old vampire. Things are too liberal here for the ones that were turned before the 1900s.”

“That’s where you’re from, isn’t it?”

“London. But I haven’t been there in years.” He didn’t dare tell her how many.

“What’s the new king like?”

“He’s American ... young too. There was a bit of an upset when he took over. He does things differently. I don’t understand the upsurge in new feeders. It could be they’re stocking up before new rules are put in place.”

“What kind of rules?”

The waiter floated into view then and Max’s voice dropped. “Enough talk for now. When you’re finished eating, we’ll take a walk around and see if we come across anything interesting.”

Erica nodded as the waiter brought her appetizer. Max was right about the food. It looked and smelled wonderful. If only her stomach would settle enough to let her enjoy it. She wasn't over the adrenaline rush Max had caused earlier. Her body still thrummed with desire for him. Food, even fabulous food, wasn't going to fulfill all her needs tonight.

While she ate, Max sipped a glass of dark wine. The liquid looked like blood but smelled sweet, like candy. She found herself wanting to ask for a taste, but afraid he'd admonish her for stepping out of line. It bothered her more that she liked the feeling. She was actually worried about pleasing him and doing the right thing. What was wrong with her? Why did she crave his approval--and worse, his demanding touch? This wasn't normal.

Max talked idly about his day while Erica studied her food. Filet mignon with a medley of baby vegetables, prepared to perfection. She wished she didn't enjoy it, wished she could push the plate away and demand they get on with their mission to find Elena. What would happen, she wondered, as she savored a bite and gazed into Max's eyes, if she did just that? Would he punish her? Would he take her home and teach her an unforgettable lesson in obedience?

She reached for her own drink and gulped. She would have put the icy glass against the heated skin of her neck, but that would be crass.

"Is there a ladies' room?" she asked finally. A few moments out of the spotlight of his heated gaze might give her a chance to compose herself.

"I'll escort you."

"To the ladies' room?"

"You're not to go anywhere alone. I'll wait outside, of course." He rose and she waited for him to pull her chair out before she stood. With his hand on her waist, they walked through the gilded mid-level of Gregori's to a fountained portico where a sign in gold leaf pointed to the restrooms.

"I'll be right here," Max said. "Inside, you're to talk to no one."

She nodded and let herself through the heavy oak door. Inside the quiet, perfumed staging area she regarded her reflection in the full-length mirror. In the tight black sheath, she looked perfectly calm, utterly in control. She saw no outward sign of the waves of nervous anticipation that rolled through her every time she looked at Max.

In the sink area she re-applied her lipstick and ran cold water over her wrists. After a few deep breaths she decided it was time to get back to work. As she slung her purse strap over her bare shoulder, one of the toilet stalls opened and a woman sauntered out.

She was beautiful in an exotic way with almond shaped eyes of jade green and long black hair. She smiled at Erica, showing her flat human teeth as she took her place in front of the wide mirror.

"You're new," the woman said as she leaned forward to brush her long lashes with an unnecessary touch of mascara.

Erica nodded.

"He told you not to talk to anyone, right?"

She nodded again and smiled demurely. What if she spoke to this woman? Maybe ask if she'd seen Elena? What would Max do to her?

"Don't worry. This room is soundproof. He won't know you've said anything. I'm Vera Nighe. I belong to Benton Carlisle."

"I'm ... Ricki. I ... belong to Max Hart." The emotional tumult that followed her reply left Erica dizzy. She'd promised Max she would speak to no one. Should she have told this woman she was here with him? Did it matter? Why did it give her pleasure to say she belonged to the handsome man waiting for her outside the door?

"It's nice to meet you, Ricki. I hope you enjoy yourself here."

"Thank you."

Vera smiled, finished touching up her perfect makeup and left. Erica waited a few more minutes while two halves of her psyche battled each other in her head. The logical side of her brain wanted out of this entire situation right now. She still had time to escape with her dignity intact and salvage her precarious self-image. The other, darker side of her mind was shamelessly begging for release. She pictured herself strolling out of the bathroom and baiting Max with a defiant look that would challenge him to put her in her place. She replayed the moment in her apartment, when, clutched in his arms as he siphoned her blood, she'd silently wished for him to tear her dress off and make love to her.

That part of her could not be allowed to take over. If she gave in to those abnormal desires, she'd be lost. She'd never find Elena if she became enthralled by a vampire.

The answer was simple. She had to get away now. Max would take her home if she asked him to--he'd probably be relieved by the request.

She'd almost reached the bathroom door when she heard the sound. The tinny, distant melody of voices trickled through the ductwork. That, by itself, wasn't unusual. Restrooms in public buildings often had excellent acoustics. She remembered back in grammar school when she and Elena were taught in separate classrooms, sneaking into the first floor girls' bathroom while her twin hid in the one on the second floor. They would whisper into the heating vents and share gossip and secrets.

Drawn by the memory, and the voyeuristic spirit that had awakened in her unexpectedly the night before, Erica moved toward the air conditioning duct. Covered with an ornate gold grillwork, it looked more like a wall sculpture, designed to blend effortlessly into the décor.

She listened just for a moment and what she heard made her blood run cold.

"I need you to help me. Ricki, I need you to help me."

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Chapter Nine

Max crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against a marble pillar next to the indoor fountain. It had probably been sixty years since he'd waited on a woman this long. In his London years, if a female had kept him waiting longer than ten minutes, she'd have found her own way home.

He tapped his foot. Was Erica playing with him? He'd seen that galvanizing flash of mischief in her eyes and it made him want her that much more. As frightened as she was, as focused on finding her sister, there was a part of her that enjoyed the game. He'd seen it once too often to believe it was a fluke. She wanted to test him, to tease him and see how far she could go. She wanted him to lose control with her and if only she knew how close he was to doing just that--and how he would ravage her if his desire took flight unchecked--she'd probably climb out the bathroom window and catch a cab home.

Maybe that's what she had done.

When a raven-haired beauty strolled out of the bathroom, a new worry assailed him. Had the two women spoken? Max vaguely recognized the woman--her name was Veronica--or Vera, something with a V. She belonged to one of Gregori Nachevik's upper echelon, one that had stayed behind to keep tabs on Jake Beaumont when the new vampire king assumed power. She was about as powerful as a human got in the vampire world. Her influence probably surpassed even that of the king's concubine, whom Max had heard was also human.

It made a strange sort of sense. A powerful male vampire would be wise to avoid a liaison with a vampiress. She'd be more apt to stake him while he slept and assume his power. A human 'mate' or even a privileged feeder was a much wiser choice to keep a man's secrets and to warm his bed--considering that humans actually had warmth.

Where was Erica?

When she came out, he'd give her exactly what she wanted. He'd upbraid her, gently but with a promise of more to come, and he'd detail how he was going to punish her for insubordinance. He could tell her things that would bring that sexy blush back to her cheeks and make her tremble under his touch. He licked his lips at the thought.

Did she know how much power she had over him? He'd known her less than twenty-four hours and yet she was burned into his psyche deeper than any of the women who had shared his bed and fed his hunger for decades back in London.

He was one breath short of barreling into the ladies' room when she appeared. Her hazel eyes were wide and her honey-toned skin had gone deathly white.

He crossed over to her and grabbed her elbow more to hold her up

than to admonish her. “Are you all right? What happened in there?”

“Elena--I heard her voice through the vents. She’s trapped here.”

“What? You heard her?”

“She begged me to help her. Max, she’s here. We have to find her.”

Max held her frightened gaze and a warning tingle went off at the back of his neck. Whatever she heard, she believed it was her sister, but the whole thing seemed so outrageous. Was it possible that Elena Talbot had been taken prisoner by a vampire mate and was actually being held against her will at Gregori’s? It made no sense.

He tugged Erica behind the pillar where the echoing gurgle of the fountain would drown out their conversation.

“Erica, do you realize what you’re saying? If Elena is here, there’s no way we can get her out. I’m going to have to get back-up.”

“What kind of back-up?”

“I’ll call my partner and some of my colleagues. We may have to get permission from the king to search the place.”

“Just do it, Max. I have to save her. I know she’s here. I know it was her voice.”

He didn’t dare tell her that he found it too incredible to believe. He looked up at the ornately painted ceiling above them. There were private dining rooms upstairs, and probably a few special rooms below the main floor as well for guests with unusual tastes. A vampire might hold a feeder in one of those rooms--a feeder who had made agreements she wasn’t prepared to keep.

“The only thing we can do right now is leave,” he said, softening his grip on her arm.

“No! We have to--”

He clamped his hand over her mouth and pushed her farther into the corner behind the fountain. “Shh!” He hissed in her ear. “We cannot cause any kind of scene.”

She struggled against him and he felt her teeth on his palm. If she broke his skin and drew blood, she’d feel it instantly. The deadly desire to drink was overwhelming when it hit. If she drew even the smallest amount of his blood into her mouth she’d be compelled to take more until the change began.

He pulled his hand away and turned her in his arms, then pushed her against the wall. “Don’t do that.” His breath in her ear was ragged. “Don’t ever bite a vampire, do you understand?”

She nodded but didn’t go still. She pushed back against him and a small sound escaped her lips. In response he held her tighter. “Erica, Erica.…” He wanted to hold her and comfort her, but at the same time, if they’d been in private, he wouldn’t have been able to control himself. He had to get her out of here and get away from her before he did something she’d regret.

“We’re leaving. Don’t make another sound.”

Slowly he turned her to face him. The defiant fire flickered in her eyes

only for a moment, then dull fear replaced it. Max straightened and swallowed hard. There was someone behind him. A vampire.

* * * *

Erica held her breath as a shadow fell across the alcove. She saw a man, broad shouldered and barrel-chested, in a dark three-piece suit. She didn't dare raise her eyes to his.

She sank back against the wall and tried to quell her shivering as Max turned around.

"Everything all right, Maxwell?"

"Mr. Carlisle. Everything is fine." He held his hand out and Erica slipped her fingers into his. He brought her into the light and into the scrutiny of the vampire who owned Vera Nighe.

"Who is this sweet morsel? Maxwell, you've been holding out on your friends at the club, haven't you?"

"Her name is Ricki. She's very new."

"She looks it. No offense, but the lady is shivering. What have you done to her, Max?" Carlisle laughed and held his hand out to Erica. She glanced at Max who gave her leave to step forward and allow the other man to kiss her hand.

As Carlisle brushed his cold lips over her skin, he breathed in her scent and held it as one savors the smoke from a fine cigar. Erica cringed and fought off a shudder of disgust. Under other circumstances she might have found Benton Carlisle handsome and perhaps charming, but the evil light in his eyes left her terribly cold.

Vera hovered behind him. She wore a sympathetic smile and briefly Erica wondered if she might find an ally in this mysterious woman. If only she could find a way for them to be alone together again.

"I was about to take Ricki home. She's had quite enough for one night."

"Surely you have time to join us in the Round Room for dessert."

Max glanced at Erica and his look told her it was an invitation he didn't dare refuse. In a strange way, she was glad. The longer they stayed inside Gregori's the better her chance of locating Elena.

"We'll see you there."

Carlisle nodded and gestured for Vera to follow him toward the curving staircase that led past the fountain to the club's upper floor. With a quick glance over her shoulder, his lovely companion sashayed after him.

Max hesitated just a moment and his hands tightened on Erica's waist. "This isn't good. Benton Carlisle shouldn't have any interest in me."

"What's going to happen now?"

Max sucked in a breath and leveled a stone-cold gaze at Erica that made her heart rise into her throat. "You've been disobedient tonight. And

I'm going to have to punish you for that. I'd say if you want to get out of here in one piece, you're going to have to keep it up."

* * * *

The Round Room was a universe apart from the rarified atmosphere of Gregori's first floor dining rooms. Here, the walls were painted black, and like After Dark, a pulsating beat rattled Erica's bones when she stepped over the threshold.

Inside, a complex lighting system created dizzying effects on the walls and the floor. Swirling spirals of color, stark white strobe lights and prismatic arcs illuminated the patrons who were oddly transformed from the elegant personas they wore downstairs.

Everywhere Erica looked, there were vampires feeding. Rather than tables and chairs, the room held couches, divans and banks of oversized pillows. Much like Club Dead's grotto, the scenes taking place ran the gamut from a couple locked in a lover's embrace to orgies involving several humans and vampires trussed in tight leather, chains and spiked collars.

She pressed herself back against Max, and she felt his hesitation. In here, he might not be able to protect her from the others if they wanted her. That thought terrified her. Giving herself over to Max was one thing, but to a group of ravenous vampires--she could never do that.

"We won't be here long, I promise," he said close to her ear. He nudged her forward a step just as Vera Nighe appeared. The lovely woman Erica had met in the ladies' room looked different in the fractured light. Her skin looked much paler and her eyes seemed sunken. The delicate buttons on the front of her cream-colored dress were open, exposing the deep valley between her breasts.

She smiled at them and offered her hand to Erica.

"Come with me, sweet one ... I'll get you a drink."

Erica looked back at Max. His expression was stony. "No. She stays with me."

Vera pouted and surged closer, shimmying forward to bump her hip against Max's. "Now's not the time to be selfish."

"Maybe later." Max pulled Erica away from Vera and led her toward an unoccupied couch. He drew her down to sit next to him then gently eased her body across his. Cradled in his arms she felt another conflicting surge of emotions. Had they been alone, she would have felt cherished, and desirable, but here, on display in front of so many others, she felt exposed. She stiffened when Max lowered his head to her neck.

"Please don't," she said when she felt the tips of his fangs against her skin. "Not here."

"I have to--"

Erica struggled against him and he held her tighter. The feel of his

hands commanding her to mold against him would have been irresistible if she wasn't suddenly so afraid. "No…."

"Maxwell. I'm glad you decided to join us."

Erica looked up as Benton Carlisle's shadow fell over them once again. Also transformed, he'd become a frightening caricature of his former self. His elegant suit jacket and crisp white shirt were gone, replaced by a leather vest and pants. In one hand he held a coiled whip and in the other a leash that connected him to a woman who wore nothing at all.

"Mr. Carlisle." Max's voice was low and steely. Erica tensed as he pushed her gently off his lap.

"Max ... why don't you come with me for a moment? There's some business I'd like to discuss with you."

"Business? Now?"

"It's rather important. It involves security here at the club, and I know your department often looks into private affairs if there's a special request."

Erica stared up Carlisle, entranced. It shocked and amazed her to see this man, who only a short time ago looked like the consummate corporate executive, now dressed in leather and leading a naked woman around on a leash. The absurdity of hearing him discuss business with Max made Erica's stomach turn.

She cast a sympathetic glance at the woman, who responded by bearing bloody fangs in a vicious snarl. The vampiress, apparently bored by the proceedings, tugged on the chain that dipped from her slender throat to Carlisle's fist.

Her reward for impatience was a tap with the handle of Carlisle's whip. She pouted, but with her red-tipped fangs protruding the expression looked dangerous rather than demure.

Erica looked away.

"We'll only be a moment, Maxwell. I promise not to keep you from your lovely lady very long."

Erica's heart twisted when Max rose. He gave her a grave look that would have melted her heart if he'd held it longer than a second. As she watched, his expression morphed dangerously and his fangs grew.

"You stay right here. Don't move, no matter what."

She nodded. She had no intention of moving an inch. As long as everyone else in the room kept their distance, she'd be fine ... for a few seconds at least.

Max moved off with Carlisle and Erica wrapped her arms around her herself. She folded herself up on the soft couch and forced herself to scan the room for a sign of Elena. With so many people writhing in the darkness, she couldn't focus on any specific features. Her gaze fell inadvertently on the sparkling chains, the spiked collars and the undulating flesh all around her. She shivered as the image of the naked vampiress tethered to Benton Carlisle played through her mind.

"Good! You're alone!" Vera's voice broke through Erica's reverie and she looked over to find the other woman kneeling before her. In Vera's hands rested a wine glass full of what appeared to be the same dark liquid Max had sipped during dinner. "I brought you a drink."

Erica eyed the glass. The sumptuously sweet smell reached her and her mouth watered for a taste, but Max hadn't given her leave to accept a drink.

"I'd better not."

Vera pouted and swirled the liquid enticingly in the glass. "It tastes like candy. It will help you relax. I know this place can be overwhelming the first time." Vera smiled at her and swayed to the insistent beat. "Once you get used to it, you'll love it here. You can be completely free." She held the glass up for Erica to sniff the sensuously sweet aroma again. The bouquet was so strong Erica could almost taste it. She wanted to so badly.

Erica looked up from the depths of the wine and gestured toward another vampiress who wore a dress that looked like chain mail. The female's narrow hips were girded with a heavy leather belt to which her arms were tethered with cuffs. Two men who appeared human led her across the room to a collection of pillows. When they pushed her to her knees, Erica looked away.

"She doesn't look very free to me."

Vera laughed. "She's a vampire, darling. She's in complete control of that scenario. In time you'll learn. You have all the power." The woman made a sound like a purr and settled herself on the floor at Erica's feet. "Max needs you much more than you need him."

Erica took another look around the room. In the distance she thought she saw Max and Carlisle but she wasn't certain. She leaned closer to Vera and tried to whisper over the pounding music. "Have there been a lot of new feeders around lately?"

Vera nodded. "Take a sip and I'll tell you more." She tapped the rim of the glass and held it up to Erica. As Vera looked up, the heavy curtain of her dark hair fell back to expose fresh bite marks just under her left ear. "It'll give you strength."

"Strength for what?"

Vera grinned. "Whatever Max has planned for you." Mischief sparkled in her eyes. "It's fortified with herbs like those energy drinks they serve at the human bars now."

Erica looked at the wine again. She wondered why Max hadn't offered her any during dinner. "Maybe when Max comes back."

Vera sighed and took a deep sip of the wine herself. With a shrug, she set the glass down on the floor and rose. She held out her hands to Erica. "Do you want to dance with me?"

"Dance? With you?" Was beautiful Vera coming on to her?

"Just for fun, come on!" Vera pulled Erica to her feet and tugged her

to an open section of the floor where several couples swayed to the music. A moment later, as a comfortable haze descended over Erica's vision, she found herself swirling around in time to the beat. Vera's hands on her hips, guided her in an undulating rhythm that made her forget Max and Elena ... and everything else.

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Chapter Ten

Max kept his eyes on Erica from across the room while Benton Carlisle asked him mundane questions about security. He didn't need to wonder if this forced separation from Erica was planned.

When he saw Vera try to give her a glass of wine, he bared his fangs. "I'll report your concerns to my superiors, Mr. Carlisle," he said as evenly as possible. "It's nothing we can't handle."

"Of course, of course," Carlisle grinned back and tugged on the chain of his captive vampiress. She growled. "Would you like to join in some of our private activities tonight? Your new feeder looks especially interesting."

"She's not ready."

"She looks ready to me." Carlisle inclined his head to the dance floor where Vera was dancing in sensuous circles around Erica. When the other woman leaned over and kissed Erica on the lips, Max growled, too. "I've got to go. I'll get back to you in a few days."

Carlisle nodded absently. "I'm sure you will, Maxwell, I'm sure you will." He laughed and pulled his captive female to him as Max walked away.

Walking across the dance floor took forever, and by the time Max reached Erica, she swayed in a dreamy haze while Vera ground their bodies together. She smelled of vampire wine.

She giggled when he grabbed her wrist and dragged her toward him. "You were supposed to stay on the couch."

"I wanted to dance!" She delivered her protest through a feathery laugh. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she pushed her hips against him. Vera tried to sidle between their bodies, but Max shoved her aside.

"She's finished," Max told Carlisle's woman. "Hands off."

"So selfish. Couldn't we share?" Vera tried again to come between them and Max pushed her aside once again. This time he pulled Erica away, toward the Round Room's grand entrance. She stumbled after him with a mild protest.

"Do we have to go? I was actually having fun."

"Yes, we do. There's nothing more we can accomplish here tonight."

Erica giggled again. "Okay."

When they reached the door he had to physically push her through it. Out in the corridor, he had to hold her up. This wasn't normal. He hadn't seen her drink the wine. She'd had nothing except her meal and the drink he'd ordered for her with dinner.

Max draped Erica's arm over his shoulder and hoisted her onto his hip. "Come on. Time to go home."

"I don't want to."

"I'm sure you don't. But you need to sleep this off."

She looked up at him and with adoration in her eyes. It stung him. If

she'd looked at him that way when she was sober, he'd probably have fallen in love with her on the spot. "Are you going to punish me, Max? I was so bad."

"We'll talk about that later. Right now, let's concentrate on keeping you on your feet."

* * * *

The trip back to Erica's apartment was a struggle. Though she dozed during the car ride, she woke as giggly and unsteady as before and he had to carry her to the front door. He searched her purse for the keys while she leaned on the doorjamb and fixed a seductive gaze on him. When he opened the door and pushed her inside, she lurched toward the couch and fell across the fluffy cushions, kicking her shoes off as she did.

"Oh, it feels good to get those off!" She laughed again as Max closed the door and shrugged off his jacket. He crossed the room and looked down at her, sprawled on the sofa, the hem of her dress cresting on her thighs just above the band of her stockings. The sliver of pale skin exposed above her garter beckoned him. Had he been a lesser man--a lesser vampire--he'd have been unable to resist a taste.

"What am I supposed to do with you?" he asked as she rolled on her side to make room for him on the couch. "I can't leave you like this and by the time you sober up it'll be daylight."

"Sober up? I'm not drunk, Max. I only had that spritzer with dinner and ... hmmm ... What else did I have?"

"It's not how much you drank, it's what you drank. Someone drugged you tonight."

Erica's response was a sensuous sigh that rasped against Max's heightened senses. She rolled onto her stomach and gave him a seductive grin over her bare shoulder.

"I don't believe you."

He sighed. This wasn't how he'd pictured the evening ending.

"Come on." He grabbed her wrist and dragged her to her feet. She fell against his chest and slithered one hand inside the front of his shirt.

"Take this off, Max. Let me touch you."

"Maybe later. Right now you need to go to bed." He held her up and guided her gently toward the bedroom, but halfway there she dug her toes into the carpet and stopped.

"Let's do it right here, Max, on the floor. Make love to me right here."

With her warm and pliant in his arms, how could he resist? He wanted her, in fact he'd wanted nothing else since the moment he saw her at After Dark. Why couldn't he just give in and do as she asked?

"You don't know what you're asking, love. If you did, you wouldn't have to say it twice."

"I need you, Max. I need to feel something. Pleasure, pain, I don't care. Just make me feel something."

Max growled. The loneliness in her voice tore through him, touching memories he'd worked hard to suppress. How could he tell her he knew how she felt? He'd spent so many years not sure if he was living because nothing touched him since the night he'd been turned, lured by what he thought was a hot-blooded woman into a cold-water flat on the East End. No warm-blooded being came near him for decades after that unless he willed them to so he could feed from them. All he'd wanted for so long was to be touched, to be wanted like Erica wanted him now.

He allowed himself to caress her neck and shoulders, then slid one hand to the zipper of her dress. He tugged it down inch by inch to the small of her back exposing an expanse of perfect skin. When he ran his fingertips down the elegant ridge of her spine, her skin pebbled and she shivered deliciously.

He parted the V of black satin and let the dress fall over her hips and into a puddle on the floor. The sound she made as she leaned against him caused his aching cock to pulse with need. This is wrong, he told himself. If he indulged his fantasy too much longer, he'd lose control completely.

Before she made another sound, he scooped her up in his arms and carried her down the hall to the bedroom. The darkness made no difference to his enhanced eyesight. He saw as clearly as if the lights were on. The bed was larger than he'd have imagined for a woman who lived alone. Covered with a plumb-colored spread just a shade darker than the carpet, and heaped with satiny throw pillows, it invited much more than comfortable sleeping.

He drew aside the covers and placed her on the bed where she stretched sensuously. Her breasts jutted as she arched--begging him to touch the tight pink nipples and ivory mounds. She mumbled incoherently to him and reached out to draw him down on her, but he resisted.

He took her wrists in one hand and held them over her head. She writhed with pleasure at his demand, reveling in the power he held over her. Her reaction was almost too much for him. He could have her like this, dominate her and feel no guilt because she obviously enjoyed it.

If not for the drug, he'd have mounted her and shown her everything she wanted to learn.

Instead he took a deep breath and commanded her to remain still. She obeyed, and her eyes fluttered closed. He touched her face but she remained that way, finally asleep.

He sighed and reached down to unfasten the garters that held her stockings in place. One at a time he rolled the black silk down her legs, exposing the honeyed skin beneath. Behind her left knee he found a beauty mark that begged him to taste it. He would have, but the aroma of her skin, her arousal even in sleep, drove him mad. He had to finish his task and leave her before he gave in to his desires.

Now, wearing only a black thong, she sighed and stretched in her sleep. He removed the skimpy scrap of cloth, lowering it over her thighs slowly and reveling in her final secrets revealed.

He'd won. He'd undressed her, touched her and drank in her perfection with his eyes. Satisfied with his own resolve, he dragged the blankets over her, tucked her in and walked away.

Tomorrow, when she regained control of her senses, he'd tell her all about it in excruciating detail and thus begin her punishment.

* * * *

Erica floated in a sea of sensations. Ribbons of colored sound carried her high up to a cool mountain peak and down to a warm ocean of golden sand. She felt wonderful, but uncertain as well. She remembered tasting the color red, candy sweet and tempting on Vera's sumptuous lips. She'd never been kissed by a woman before, never would have imagined that it could excite her.

Erica abandoned the troubling thought and concentrated on her dreamscape. The horizon stretched forever toward a blue sky filled with buttery clouds.

Elena looked down on her from those clouds and for an instant Erica tasted death. She cried out and reached for her sister. As she did, Elena's face shattered and fell to earth, making a sound like hail on glass.

She woke to that sound.

Oh God. What had she done?

She turned to look at the window and the movement caused her head to throb. Sunlight peeked in around the drawn shade but the thrumming sound continued. So where was it in coming from?

The shower. She clutched the blankets to her body and shivered when she realized she was naked beneath them. Her dress lay neatly over the bedroom chair, her shoes and stockings sat on the floor beneath it along with her garter and black thong underwear. Her careful chignon hung around her shoulders and her mouth and eyes felt gritty.

Whoever was in the shower was whistling.

She cringed.

Then it came back to her in a flood of disturbing memories. The odd hangover cleared and her stomach, which moments before had been threatening to rebel, now rumbled for food.

She remembered only vague details from the night before and though her recollection was fuzzy, it didn't include undressing herself. Max Hart had some explaining to do.

She threw off the blankets and hurried across the room to retrieve her bathrobe from its place behind the door. She looked in the mirror and smoothed her hair, then checked quickly for new bite marks before she closed

her robe. Other than the spot on her neck that he'd drank from the night before, her skin remained flawless. Lucky for him, she thought.

"Max!" Standing before the bathroom door, she yelled once as loudly as possible, which only made the throbbing pain in her head resume with a vengeance. When Max didn't answer, she pounded on the door. "Get out here, now!"

She waited a beat and stepped back when the bathroom door flew open. He wore only a towel, draped around his neck.

Their eyes locked for a moment, and Erica managed to hold her comments in check while he slid the towel off his shoulders and wrapped it around his waist.

"I see you're up." He greeted her with a raised eyebrow.

"You too." She smirked and for a moment, the self-conscious look on his face made her forget her anger. Only for a moment. "What the hell did you do to me last night?"

His eyes darkened and he tilted his head. "Not half as much as I wanted to."

Erica swallowed. She felt flushed and she was suddenly aware of the fact that she wore nothing beneath her thin cotton robe.

"What was in my drink last night?" she demanded stepping back as he left the bathroom. He headed for the living room and she followed him, clutching her robe around her.

"Some vampires use a combination of herbs to relax their feeders. Normally it isn't that potent but you must have gotten an extra large dose. You're lucky I got back to you when I did."

"You shouldn't have left me alone."

"I didn't have a choice. Benton Carlisle is a powerful vampire. I had to go with him. And while I was gone you were supposed to be following the other rules."

"Well, I tried."

"Not very hard by the looks of it."

Erica crossed her arms over her breasts and watched him while he rooted around her living room gathering his clothes. A blanket from her linen closet lay over the couch attesting to where he'd spent the night.

"You wandered off and left me alone at a vampire orgy, where I got drugged and groped by another woman and--"

"And kissed. Don't forget kissed." He leveled a sardonic gaze at her.

Erica gaped. That memory came back, too. It hadn't been a dream. Vera had been all over her. "And I'm to blame?"

"You were supposed to be obedient."

"You told me to be disobedient. Didn't you? Or did I misinterpret one of your many mixed signals?"

"What mixed signals?" He spread his arms wide leaving his towel unattended and hanging precariously.

"Oh let's see--every one. I don't know what to make of you, Max. Before we left here, you were acting like you wanted to…."

"Like I wanted to what?"

Erica flushed hot. She couldn't say the words. "Then you apparently brought me home, undressed me, and dumped me in bed ... alone."

* * * *

Max dropped his gathered clothes and leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest in a pose similar to Erica's. Acutely aware of the fact that she'd already seen what was under his towel, he wasn't sure he liked the direction the conversation was taking. Of course, with the sun up, he was trapped. Their argument would have to work its way to some type of conclusion and if they both didn't get dressed very soon....

"What would you have preferred? That I took you in the state you were in? Don't think I didn't want to. Don't think it was easy for me to peel that dress off you ... to slide your stockings down over your legs, inch off your underwear and leave you there, in bed unconscious and completely vulnerable." Max paused and watched her reaction to his words. A faint tremor racked her and her breathing grew shallow. He knew she was contemplating how easy it would have been for him to do whatever he wanted with her.

"I'm a vampire, Erica. We come into the world ready to take what we want. It requires a lot of effort for us to act human sometimes. We're governed by certain desires, needs we can't ignore. Believe me when I say, it was all I could do to walk away from you last night because if I hadn't ..."

"What?" Her voice was raw. He saw the hard tips of her nipples through the thin fabric of her robe and he remembered how badly he'd wanted to taste them last night. He remembered holding her close to him while he undressed her. The memory of her stretched on the bed, reaching for him made him hard all over again.

He could have taken her so easily then. But he didn't want her that way. He wanted her with him--awake and aware and begging him to do things to her she'd only dreamed about letting a man do. He wanted to see her eyes go dark with desire and her lips part as she sighed his name.

"If I hadn't ... I'd still be inside you right now."

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Chapter Eleven

Erica trembled at Max's revelation. She dropped her arms and stared as her anger drained away. Something inside her began to heat and suddenly she was aware of every sensation. The cool fabric of her robe rubbed against her breasts and an ache began to build between her legs. Max's stare felt like a lead weight, holding her in place and stealing her breath. Her knees felt weak.

Max took a step toward her and she instinctively bared her neck to him. The memory of his arms around her, trapping her to his side while he drank from her, made her shudder with desire she shouldn't have felt.

When he put his fingers on the pulse point of her neck, just above the marks he'd made, her muscles coiled and she arched against his touch.

"Do you know how much danger you put yourself in last night?" he said as he took another step. Now he was right next to her. She felt the heat of his skin and didn't question it. He smelled like steam and male power and the almond soap she loved. His fingers closed on her neck, caressing her skin beneath the collar of her robe. "You attracted someone's attention. Someone devious enough to drug you."

"Who?"

"Maybe Vera. I don't know. She may have been trying to lure you away from me. You saw Carlisle with his vampire bitch. He might have drawn me away so Vera could lead you off somewhere where I couldn't find you. Carlisle wants you. I could smell it on him."

"But I'm yours…." She breathed the words without thinking. All coherent thought left her as Max dipped his head close to her neck. His teeth scraped her shoulder and she squeezed her eyes shut to block out the fear of losing control.

"Yes. You're mine. Or at least you were supposed to be mine last night." His fingers slid into the folds of her robe and parted it. Erica sighed as he drew a line of fire between her breasts. "When I got you home, you asked me to make love to you. Do you remember that?"

She shook her head. "I remember you standing over me."

"I did, for a long time, wondering what to do with you. I wanted to shake you. You've gotten yourself in too deep already and I wanted to scare you away from this world. I thought about tearing your dress, drinking from the spot right here--" Max thrust his hand between her thighs and Erica gasped. Her body throbbed with need for him, and the feel of his fingers on her sensitive flesh was her undoing. She moaned.

"If I'd bitten you there and left you, you'd be wondering now what I did to you. I could have made you think anything I wanted. I could have left you with the memory of my cock inside you, but I didn't because I didn't want you to just remember it. I wanted you to feel it."

Max brought his fingers to the nest of curls between her legs and

delved inside. Erica cried out and spread her legs. He caught her around the waist and pushed her backward against the wall.

She dropped her head to one side, offering herself to him again. When he bent his head to her neck and sucked her skin into his mouth, she gasped. She shuddered against him when his teeth pierced her skin. Instinctively, she spread her legs father to allow him access anywhere he wanted to go. Their hands met between them and battled to pull the towel from around his waist.

With the last barrier between them gone, he hoisted her up and positioned his hard thighs between hers. His free hand pushed her robe from her shoulders, baring her breasts to him. He caressed her as he drank and his erection grew until the hard length teased her to distraction.

She wrapped her legs around him and he held her another few inches higher, positioning her above him. He lowered her as he thrust upward and she bit her lip at the sweet sensation as he took possession of her body.

* * * *

Max drank deeply as he entered her, then released his hold on her neck. It wasn't about feeding anymore. He took just enough blood to fuel his desire to the breaking point. Now, with her essence inside him, he was ready to show her exactly what his world was like.

He wrapped his arms around her and carried her to the bedroom. They didn't make it to the bed. He placed her on the floor and knelt over her, delving deeper while she moved against him.

"Open your eyes," he commanded. "I need to see it."

She obeyed and he kissed her, plunging his tongue deep. She still tasted like the wine and now, mixed in her scent was musk and primal fear, lust and anger. He craved it all, every emotion, every sensation. He took it all in and let it wash over her, using his ability to shape her perception so that she felt his desperate need mixed with her own. He made her feel his heart pounding under her hands as he took her, made her feel his skin grow slick with sweat as he worked her body to the breaking point.

When her inner muscles began to pulse, he slowed his thrusts. With long-practiced skill he allowed a calming sensation to wash over her, cooling her desire just enough to bring her back from the edge. Then he started again.

* * * *

Erica felt her climax nearing. She reached for it, meeting Max thrust for thrust. She locked her legs around his back and dragged her nails over his skin, drawing him deeper until she thought she would break. At the very moment the wave crested, a cool breeze seemed to stir between them and it pulled her away from the edge of the precipice.

She lay panting beneath him for a moment, lost in his blue gaze,

aware of nothing but the delicious pressure of his erection inside her. He drew out slowly and she whimpered for him. He thrust in again and bent to take one aching nipple in his mouth. He sucked the hard tip and rolled it against his tongue, causing a sensation that arrowed straight to her womb.

"Don't stop!" She begged him over and over and time and time again he brought her right to the edge, then soothed the ache just before the wave broke over her.

The pleasure became pain and the desire became a frantic battle for release. "Now! Now!" She pleaded for it but he ignored her demands and continued the exquisite torture, bringing her right to the edge once more.

"Last night," he said between thrusts, "you asked if I was going to punish you for disobedience. The answer is yes."

She threw her head back and laughed, but the laugh became a sob when she nearly peaked again. "Not like this," she gasped.

"What would you have me do? Hold you down? Tie you up? Spank you?"

Anything would be preferable to denying her release. She wanted it, needed it. Erica had never begged a man for anything, but she begged Max to let her come.

"Promise me one thing, and I'll give you what you want."

"Anything!" She agreed without thought. All she wanted was the shuddering explosion that would free her from his thrall. She bucked against him and he stilled her with his body, holding her motionless as he kissed her into silence.

"Promise me you'll let me handle the case from now on. My way. I won't take you to any more bars where you could be drugged or touched by another man...or woman again. Promise me you'll keep yourself safe and let me find your sister for you."

Erica let out a cry of frustration. She was so close, so desperate and so completely at his mercy, she would have done anything he asked, obeyed any command he gave her. But this ....

She nodded. "I promise."

He kissed her again and she cried as the ache ebbed once more. When he began to thrust into her again, she held her breath, waiting for the moment he'd take it all away, but this time he brought her to the edge and over. The orgasm she'd been dying for tore through her and she gasped as it rocked her body into utter oblivion.

She cried out as he came, the tremors of his body matching hers. She felt him explode inside her, a burst of liquid heat that had to be an illusion, a delicious, sensuous illusion.

When the shock waves ceased, her body trembled and she shivered in his embrace. After a moment, Max rose above her. He kissed her once more and then lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed. The soft blankets felt like clouds beneath her aching limbs. She shuddered at the sensation as he

drew the sheet across her body. Her nerve endings trembled as he caressed her. Every touch was like an electric shock. After a time, her inner muscles calmed and she sank into a blissful sleep as he climbed into bed next to her and wrapped himself around her.

"Erica," he whispered as he kissed her hair and settled her head onto his chest. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Anything you want," she mumbled as she clung to him. "Anything you want."

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Chapter Twelve

Erica wrapped her arms around her bent knees and stared down at Max's sleeping form. At first she'd panicked to find him lying next to her, unmoving and cold. She thought he was dead.

Of course, she was right.

She reached out and smoothed his dark hair and he stirred, but his skin didn't warm to her touch and his chest didn't rise and fall.

She sat back and contemplated how she'd come to this.

She'd never experienced anything like what Max had done to her that morning. At twenty-nine, she was no virgin, though her previous lovers numbered in single digits. She'd always chosen her men carefully, with an eye toward their reliable nature, rather than expertise in bed. Up until now she'd never had a man last so long or exert so much control over every nuance of the act. She'd never had a man control her orgasm before--and hold her captive with it as he had. She'd have promised him anything ... hell, she'd have given him her body if he hadn't already been inside her.

She shivered at the memory. He'd been so alive while they were making love ... or was it just sex? If Max only wanted what her body could provide him, why had he forced her to make that promise to him? Why did he want her to stay safely out of the investigation? Was it truly because he cared about her, maybe even loved her? Or was it because he knew that his world was too much for her?

What scared her most was how strong she felt now. Surrendering to him, to her innermost desires, made her feel invincible. A small part of her wanted more even now. She wanted to wake him up and tell him yes, hold me down. Tie me up. Bite me.

Who was she? How had she become this creature who sat staring at the body of her vampire lover wishing he'd awake and punish her for her aberrant thoughts?

She shook herself out of the psychological quagmire and climbed out of bed. She hesitated a moment, her attention captured by her own reflection in the mirror. When she looked at the bed, she saw only a blur of color where Max lay. When she turned she saw him in full detail, lying on his stomach, clutching a pillow under his head.

In the mirror, nothing. She couldn't focus on his image. Did that mean he wasn't real? She glanced at the clock. It was close to noon. If she opened the window shade and sunlight struck the bed, what would happen?

She shook off that disturbing thought and strolled into the living room to straighten up. It was only when she found her robe and his towel next to the couch, which she realized for the first time in her life, she'd walked through her apartment naked.

She laughed softly. The old Erica never would have done that. Where

had the old Erica gone?

She jumped when the phone rang, suddenly self-conscious. It could have just as easily been the doorbell. She pounced on the receiver before the second ring and wondered why it mattered to her if the noise disturbed Max.

"Hello?" She tried to sound normal.

"Ricki?"

Erica clutched the wall between the living room and the kitchen as the good humor drained out of her body like molten lead. The shock of hearing Elena's voice doubled her over.

"Lainey! Where are you? What happened?" The memory of her sister's voice crying through the vent at Gregori's rushed back into her mind. How had she forgotten that until now? "Where are you, Lainey, tell me now and I'll come and get you."

"I don't have a lot of time, Ricki. Only a few minutes. I need you to come to a place called The Underside, tonight…come alone."

"I'll come right now. Lainey, are you all right? What's happening to you? Did they hurt you?"

"It's Benton Carlisle. He's keeping me here. I need you, Ricki. You're the only one who can help me."

"Of course." Erica's hands shook so violently she almost dropped the phone. "I'll be there, Lainey--I'll come right now."

"No. Not now. Tonight. I won't be able to get free until tonight. Come after midnight and come alone. They know about Max and if they see him here, they'll hurt me. I have a plan to get away, Ricki, but I need your help."

Erica nodded. "Okay, okay. Lainey ... it'll be all right. I'll get you out and we'll find a safe place for you, I promise, this time will be different. Lainey? Lainey?" The only response was a dial tone.

Erica sank to the floor and stared at the cordless in her hand. At least Elena was alive. She sounded fine in fact, strong ... not drunk or stoned. That was good.

After a few deep breaths, Erica rose and returned the phone to its cradle. She glanced down the hall at the bedroom and listened. There was no sound. No snoring as she might have expected with a man in her bed, no gentle rhythmic breathing either. She had to remind herself, Maxwell Hart was dead to the world. Literally.

She sighed. She'd made him a promise--albeit under duress. She wondered what he'd do to her if he found out she was about to break it.

* * * *

"I'll be out of your way by 6:00," Max told Erica as he watched her washing dishes. Sitting at her small kitchen table with his notebook and a cup of coffee that she insisted on making for him, he felt as close to human as he

had in over a century.

Watching her denim clad rear end wiggle as she scrubbed a frying pan certainly added to the illusion. He had a raging hard on but absolutely no hint of hunger. He wanted to make love to her, but as a man, not as a vampire who tempered his need for blood with sexual demands so that both hunter and prey could derive pleasure from the union.

He just wanted to touch her, play with her hair, taste her skin and feel her come around him without any power play. No games. No blood.

He hadn't wanted that in a long time and in truth, it worried him. He couldn't enjoy his normal male desire without wondering why it had returned after all these years of heightened vampire urges. After decades of hearing the rush of blood under a woman's skin when he touched her, of tasting her emotions on his lips, he reveled in the normalcy of this moment. He reveled in watching her wash the dishes and wondered what she was thinking.

"What are you planning to do tonight?" she asked him as she completed her task. She stacked dishes neatly in the drain board and turned to him, the damp dishtowel tossed over her shoulder.

With her golden hair hanging down to her shoulders and not a hint of makeup, she was beautiful. She looked sunny and warm and alive. It made the dark empty spot where his heart used to beat ache to look at her. He wanted that feeling wrapped around him, in fact he craved it now more than blood. He'd felt alive when he made love to her. He felt human.

"I'm ... uh ... going to talk to some of my contacts. There's always someone at Gregori's and they can snoop around. I'm also going to arrange for someone to follow Benton Carlisle and Vera Nighe."

"Why?"

"He's involved in something. I really think Vera drugged you and that has me worried. I don't want you to go anywhere tonight. Once it gets dark, stay inside and keep all the shades drawn. Don't answer the door unless it's me."

She smiled shyly at him and reached for his hand. "Will you be coming back tonight? When you're done working?"

"Would you like me to? I'll be very late. I don't want to wake you."

"Sure you do," she purred and his body stirred in response. "But I have to go to work tomorrow. And I've got to get to the bank before that so I can transfer the money to pay Elena's rent."

"I wish you didn't have to do that."

Her expression faltered. "I don't want her to lose her apartment. She'll pay me back."

That wasn't true. Max saw it in her eyes. She wasn't expecting anything in return for her efforts to help her sister--probably because she'd learned long ago not to.

"Give me her address and I'll go there tonight and get something of hers I can use to track her with."

"But the landlord--"

Max laughed. "I won't be asking the landlord's permission. I won't disturb anything. I just need a piece of her clothing. A scarf would be perfect or a blouse with a collar. Maybe something with her favorite perfume on it."

"All right. She lived ... lives at 420 Fortune Drive, Building A, apartment 5."

Though he didn't need to, Max wrote it down. He'd learn a lot more from looking around Elena Talbot's apartment than just what she smelled like, and he was glad for the chance to do it without Erica along. He had a feeling he would find things there that even her sister didn't know about. His desire to protect Erica was starting to overwhelm him. He'd never felt like this before and it left him off balance and edgy.

He looked at the kitchen clock. He still had an hour until sunset.

"Come with me," he said as he rose from his chair. He took Erica's hand in his and tugged her toward the bedroom. "I want to show you something."

She raised one perfect eyebrow. "Is it something I've seen before?" Her half smile ignited him and he growled as he dragged her into his arms.

"You've seen it before, but not up close." He punctuated his words by cupping her rear and pulling her tight against him. The look in her eyes told him she understood exactly how much he wanted her.

She reached for the buttons of her blouse but he grabbed her hands and held them. "No. Everything stays on until I tell you to take it off."

She sighed happily and her breathing grew shallow. "Do we have time...?"

"We have as long as it takes. I'm not leaving here until I'm done with you."

The sound she made drove him over the edge and he scooped her up and carried her into the bedroom.

It was well after six when he left.

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Chapter Thirteen

Erica felt Max around her and inside her. She tasted him and she ached for him long after he left her apartment.

Because the memories of their lovemaking were so fresh, guilt gnawed at her as she stood before her closet looking for an outfit that would help get her into The Underside.

She hadn't mentioned anything about Elena's phone call knowing he'd insist on being involved. Erica had no illusions that her task would be easy, but she wouldn't do anything to jeopardize her sister's life. Her trips to After Dark and Club Dead had taught her more about the vampire world and what they expected of her feeders. She could do this.

A little on-line research told her The Underside was more of a Goth club, which she might have found amusing under other circumstances. What could be more Goth than vampires after all?

That thought brought her back to Max. The line between human and vampire was blurred in him. As blurred as his image had been each time she'd looked in the mirror. She hadn't asked him about it, but as they made love again that afternoon, she'd stolen glances across the room and marveled at the fact that his reflection was no more than a waxy smudge. She wondered if it was simply her own perception, clouded by the delirium of sexual fulfillment or if there was some truth at least to that bit of vampire lore.

Beyond that, she felt him and remembered him as human. Everything in the way he touched her today was different than last night. Though he'd looked at her with the same dark longing in his eyes, that dangerous look that turned her insides to liquid, he'd been gentle and slow with her. He'd kissed her senseless and caressed her body until her nerves caught fire, but he hadn't delayed her pleasure like last night. He hadn't forced her to promise him things, or tortured her with words that made her want what she couldn't have.

He'd loved her thoroughly and left her wondering once again what she'd gotten herself into.

With a ragged sigh, she thumbed through the clothes in her closet until she found a long straight skirt and a black tank top. She appraised the outfit in the mirror and tossed the top aside. A leather bustier would work better but she didn't have one.

She wished she'd insisted on going with Max to Elena's apartment. There, she'd have found a suitable outfit.

Maybe in the back of the closet with the stuff she didn't wear anymore? She dug deep, tossing things aside as she went until she came upon the item she remembered. It had been Elena's but Erica had borrowed it years ago. She laughed at the memory. A Halloween party at work was rare, but one year her manager had decided to get everyone in the spirit. Erica had dressed in an eclectic mix of beachwear and black rags, a long black wig, a broom and

a bottle of suntan lotion and called herself the "Sand-Witch." The getup won a prize and garnered her a few months of teasing from her co-workers. She thought of them now and wondered if any of them would believe how she'd spent her weekend so far. She wasn't sure she believed it herself.

She found the black top she'd worn as part of the costume and pulled it out of the closet. The sleeves were laced up the sides and the front sported rips and tears held together with silver safety pins and jump rings. It would have to do.

She mussed her hair, slathered on her darkest lipstick and ringed her eyes with black liner. The look reminded her of the girl who hadn't gotten into After Dark. If she adopted the same attitude, they'd probably welcome her at The Underside.

She left her apartment at ten and drove herself across town to the address listed on the Web site. This time she didn't care who saw her.

* * * *

"Carlisle's not there tonight?" Max adjusted the volume on his cell phone headset as he turned into the parking lot of Elena Talbot's building. His partner's voice reached him over the patchy connection. With deliberate patience, Lucas Vitale repeated what he'd just said.

"I don't see him anywhere. I know he spends most evenings here, but maybe he got tired of the place."

Max worked with Lucas regularly and the other vampire investigator was the closest thing Max had to a friend. He tried to keep the frustration out of his voice when he answered.

"I don't like that Erica is alone. I've got to finish this now, but maybe you can swing by her apartment, just to see if she's all right."

"You want me to go in, or just lurk around?" Lucas' deep voice held amusement. He was a bit of a rebel and he liked his job, perhaps too much.

"Lurk. It's what you're best at. Call me if you see anything suspicious."

"All right. I've got to take Kyra home first."

Halfway out of his car, Max paused. "Kyra is with you?"

"Of course. I needed to bring a feeder with me. You know she can handle anything."

Max shook his head. He should have expected that. Kyra knew them all and she fed them all. It was her job. And her pleasure from what Max understood. A few days ago, he might have felt a pang of jealousy, but now, just annoyance that she couldn't get home by herself. "Do me a favor and don't waste any time at Kyra's, all right? I want to know that Erica is safe."

Lucas' voice took on a curious tone. "Why so worried about a feeder?"

"She's not a feeder. She's just.…" Just what? he asked himself as he

rounded Building A and headed for the fire stairs at the back that would lead him to Apartment 5.

"Just what? Just a human? Just a good lay?"

"Shut up, Luke."

"Ooh. Did I strike a live nerve there? I didn't know you had any left."

"Just do what I ask, Lucas ... and keep Kyra out of it. I don't want her to know about Erica."

"Why not? Do you think she'll be jealous that her favorite biter has a new toy?"

Max hung up. Lucas was a prick sometimes, but he'd never let Max down yet. He jammed the cell phone into his pocket and cased the building. Getting in wouldn't be a problem. The fire stairs at the back of the building gave access to all the bedroom windows. Elena Talbot's was bare, no curtains, not even a shade. He wondered as he began to climb, if the landlord had already cleaned the place out.

Max pried the screen off the window and set it on the stairs, then hoisted the old sash, glad that he wouldn't have to break the window to get in. Once inside he lowered the sash again and moved out of the line of sight.

Two steps in, it hit him. The scent he'd been looking for. It permeated the place. A smoky mixture of musky perfume, heather and clove. He didn't need to take anything that belonged to Elena to remember it and he didn't need to give the scent to anyone else.

What he needed was to figure out how to tell Erica that he knew exactly what had happened to her sister.

* * * *

Déjà vu struck Erica as she took her place in line outside of The Underside. The back entrance was another unpainted steel fire door manned by a bouncer who could have been the twin brother to Frank from After Dark. This one looked less friendly, though. He scowled at the women and men lined up outside and rather than gesturing the unacceptable candidates out of line, he waited until they approached him and literally shoved them aside.

He seemed to get off on it. The smirk on his doughy face grew wider each time he refused someone entry.

Erica's fear and annoyance peaked as she neared her turn. If he threw her aside, how would she get in? She thought about calling Max and telling him about Elena's phone call but she knew he'd make her leave. Worse than considering that he'd leave her out of the rescue mission, was the thought of admitting she lied to him. She lied in the throes of passion and made a promise to him that she didn't intend to keep. What did that make her? Certainly not worthy of the adoration he'd shown her this afternoon. Certainly not worthy of his trust.

She shook the doubts aside and moved up to close the gap that had

opened between her and the person ahead of her in line. She still had time to walk away and call Max for help. What if he needed time to formulate a plan? She couldn't let Elena down by not being here.

Erica jerked her head up when the bouncer called, "Next! You in black!" He laughed at his own joke. Everyone in line wore black and each outfit was darker than the last.

Erica stood out because she was the only blonde in sight and that worried her. Inside, she wouldn't be able to melt into the crowd, and she wouldn't be able to avoid a body search tonight.

Just like After Dark, the man checked her for needle marks, asked if she smoked or snorted and he also squeezed her ass. She forced a smile as she shoved her inside and pretended it didn't make her want to rip his head off.

The gauntlet tonight was worse than at After Dark, but at least the music was better. Four men lined the back room and each one of them searched everyone who came through, male and female alike. Erica noted that quite a few men had been admitted and none of them seemed to be bothered by the intimate body search. Of course they had fewer places to hide contraband than women did.

Erica bit her lip and held her breath as each of the four security guards took his turn. The first one lifted her skirt and patted down her legs from crotch to ankle. He actually ran his fingers inside the leg of her panties and leered at her before he motioned her to move on. The second one looked down the front of her blouse but nothing she had made an impression on him. He motioned her on to the third who also lifted her skirt. This one sniffed her hair and she shuddered. That was almost as bad as having the first guard's fingers in her underwear.

The fourth one patted her hips and her breasts. He pushed her collar open and stamped a fluorescent butterfly on her chest, then let her pass into the club. She figured the brand meant no one would chase her down later and insist she hadn't been properly felt up ... searched. She had proof that she'd passed the security inspection.

The Underside had an odd vibe to it, and a strange smell. It took Erica a few minutes to place the sharp, smoky scent. Cloves. Small plates of incense burned everywhere, making the air heavy with the spicy aroma.

Drinks flowed freely and here she didn't have to order at the bar. A waitress pressed a glass of sweet wine into her hand moments after she arrived. She resisted the urge to take a sip. It smelled so good, but she didn't dare take any chances.

She made a quick circuit of the place to get her bearings and then found an empty corner table where she would be able to watch everything. As soon as she saw Elena, she'd make her move.

Her nerves thrummed with anticipation. She'd find Elena tonight and this half-life would end. No more rescues after this. No more sleepless nights.

No more Maxwell Hart.

A flash of white caught her attention and she zeroed in on a figure across the room that stood out even more than she did.

A tall woman with long black hair and a flowing white dress floated across the room like a runway model. Vera Nighe. Her almond eyes lit on Erica and she smiled.

"What are you doing here, little one? Where's Max?" Vera asked when she arrived at Erica's table. She looked angelic and full of life, unlike last night at Gregori's when she'd appeared sunken and tired.

"I came alone tonight." Erica wanted to lie but she thought of Elena's plea to leave Max out of it.

The other woman looked around, scanning the room with her curious gaze. "Wonderful. Then you can have a drink with me."

Erica smiled and pushed her glass toward Vera as the tall woman sat down. "Here, it's all yours."

"Come on, Max isn't around. One sip won't hurt."

"I wonder what would have happened if I'd drank the wine last night. Apparently just a whiff was enough to affect me. I barely remember anything that happened."

Vera's smile became a pretty pout. "Then you forgot all the fun we had dancing together?"

Erica shrugged.

"What a shame. We'll have to make some more memories tonight, since you're on your own."

"Where's Mr. Carlisle?" Erica asked. She wanted to sound conversational but a hint of suspicion crept into her voice. If Carlisle was responsible for hurting Elena, she wanted to make him pay.

"He'll join us soon, pretty one. Very soon."

Vera sidled closer to Erica and put her arm around her shoulders. Erica pulled away but the woman resisted and dipped her face toward Erica's for a light kiss.

Erica pushed her away. "Vera, I'm flattered, but I belong to Max and he doesn't like anyone else touching me, even other women."

"He's not here. He doesn't have to know."

"He will know. He'll find out and last night he was very angry with me about what you did ... when you kissed me."

"I thought you said you didn't remember it."

"I didn't, but he reminded me. I'd rather not be punished again, if you don't mind."

Vera pouted again. "He's bad. We're not hurting anyone. Just a little harmless flirting. It doesn't mean anything."

"I know."

"Just one? Benton likes to see me with other women. It would make him happy and I could have him smooth it over if Max found out."

"I'd rather not."

“Just one.…” Vera dove in again and Erica tried to dodge but the woman was all hands. She took Erica’s face in her fingers and kissed her on the lips again. She tasted like candy and cloves and something else.…

When she broke the kiss, Erica stared at her. “What did you do to--” The world went black before she finished her sentence.

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Chapter Fourteen

Max sat brooding in the dark apartment. The same scent that permeated Elena Talbot's apartment surrounded him, along with memories of the things that had happened here.

It made him feel ill. He didn't like the feeling. It had been years since something truly turned his stomach. Between disgust at himself and anger at whatever game Elena Talbot was playing with her sister, the feeling overwhelmed him.

When his cell phone rang, he growled into the receiver. "What?"

"Problem, Max." Lucas sounded edgy. That wasn't like him.

Max sat forward in the chair. "Where are you?"

"I'm at Erica's building. She's not here."

Max sighed. She'd lied to him. Why didn't it surprise him? "Are you sure?"

"Not to be cliché, but the lights are on and nobody's home. Her car isn't here."

Max rose and headed for the door. His confrontation would have to wait.

* * * *

Erica blinked slowly until the scene before her came into focus. Her fingers were wrapped around the steering wheel of her car, which still sat in the parking lot of The Underside. She had no recollection of leaving the club and it took her a moment to recall if she'd even gone inside. She gasped when she saw the time. Her watch read 4:30 a.m. She'd been out all night--and didn't remember a thing after Vera kissed her.

She began to shake. A cold inner tremor became a violent shiver. What had they done to her? Where was Elena? She flung the car door open and stumbled out onto the black top. The world tilted dizzily and she clutched the roof of the car for support.

The rest of the parking lot was empty.

Without considering the consequences, she ran to the back door of The Underside and started banging. The cold metal hurt her hand, but she kept at it. "Let me in! Is anyone there? I have to get in!"

Nothing. She stumbled down the stairs and ran to the front of the building. Windowless. The front door was solid wood with a fierce gargoyle faced carved on it. Erica yanked on the latch, pounded on the gargoyle's face and screamed until her throat hurt. No one answered.

No Elena. Nothing.

Still shivering, she wrapped her arms around herself and sobbed as she walked back to the car. Max was right. This was not her world. She

couldn't function here. Whatever Elena was involved in, Erica couldn't help her. Now she'd have to go back and confess to Max and beg for him to help her.

He'd hate her for breaking her promise.

He'd never trust her again.

* * * *

Max found Lucas in the parking lot of Erica's building. Dressed in dark jeans and a black leather jacket, his blond hair hidden under his black motorcycle helmet, he was little more than a shadow.

"You look like a second story man," Max said.

Lucas grinned, showing fangs. "I used to be one. I was damn good at it, too." He nodded toward Erica's bedroom window. "Nothing."

Max cursed. He should have known she'd go looking for her sister without him. "I'm going inside to look around, maybe I can figure out where she went. Can you spend some more time tracking Benton Carlisle? See if he shows up at his office today. And if you hear from Kyra, let me know."

Lucas shrugged. "Sure. Look, if you want backup tonight..."

Max shook his head. "I don't need it, yet. I'll call if I get into trouble."

"Suit yourself." Lucas turned to leave but glanced over his shoulder. "You look worried Max. I don't think I've ever seen you look worried."

"I am, Luke. And you know what? It's one of the few things I don't miss about being human.

Lucas laughed as he climbed onto his bike. "That's the biggest difference between you and me, Max. I don't miss anything at all."

Max watched the taillight of Lucas's bike recede, then let himself into Erica's apartment.

Her bedroom light was on and black clothes covered the bed. Max picked through them then checked the papers on the corner computer desk hoping to find something that would lead him in the right direction.

As an afterthought he nudged the computer mouse and watched the screen light up. He opened up her Internet browser and checked her address menu for recent activity. The last Web site she'd visited was a Goth message board frequented by feeders.

He should have known. He should have expected she would lie to him. He was only a vampire to her after all. Promises made to him didn't matter.

But promises from him, did. Whether she ever believed it or not, he cared and he was going to do what he told her he'd do whether she trusted him or not.

* * * *

Erica's fingers shook so hard she had to hold the key in both hands in order to unlock the door. Once inside her apartment, she tossed the keys aside. She had to clean off the butterfly stamp on her chest, and the wash the smoky scent of The Underside out of her hair before Max came back.

If he came back.

She put one trembling hand to her neck on the spot where he'd last bitten her. Her fingers came back with a smudge of dark blood. She stared at the stain for a moment, teetering on the brink of passing out cold. Someone had fed from her…and she had no memory of it.

That knowledge only increased her trembling. She sank against the nearest wall, gulping air and trying to regain her composure. When a hand closed over her shoulder, she screamed.

Max dragged Erica into his arms and quieted her, hushing her as she sobbed against him. He lowered her to the floor and pulled her across his lap, smoothing her hair.

"I've been waiting for hours," he murmured as her trembling finally stopped. "Why, Erica? Why couldn't you trust me?"

She looked up at him through the haze of tears that clouded her vision. "She called me, Max. She called again and asked for help. I had to go."

"And you didn't find her, did you?" His voice went hard. She swallowed and shook her head. "There's a reason for that, Erica. She's playing a game with you."

Erica sat up and stared at Max. His mouth was set in a thin line and his eyes shadowed.

"What do you mean?"

"When did she call you?"

"This morning." She hated to confess it, but with him staring at her, looking betrayed, she couldn't lie to him. "While you were asleep."

He nodded and his hands dropped from her shoulders. He sat back against the wall and stared at her.

"You smell like blood."

She looked away. A moment later he pulled the collar of her shirt roughly aside and traced a rough line from the opalescent butterfly stamp to the bloody bite marks. His expression turned to steel.

"Who did this? Carlisle?"

She didn't answer, didn't look at him. She cried out when he shook her. "Who was it?"

"I don't know! I don't know. I met Vera …."

Max dropped his arms again and rolled to his feet. He paced behind her while Erica curled into a ball and leaned against the wall.

"You let her drug you again? What were you thinking? Did you think that would get you taken to Elena?"

"I didn't drink anything. Vera kissed me…." Erica swiped at the tears that spilled down her cheeks. After the memory of Vera's warm lips on hers, there was nothing but a terrifying void.

Max was silent for a moment. When he finally spoke, his words made her shiver.

"Take off your clothes."

She stared at him but he wouldn't meet her gaze. When she hesitated, he dragged her to her feet and tore at the thin lace that held her shirt together.

Frightened and aroused by his actions, she didn't resist when he pulled the waistband of her skirt open and slid the garment roughly down her legs. He tore her underwear away, threw aside the tight black bra she wore then ran his hands down her body.

She warmed to him, despite his anger. She wanted him, if only to ease the ache in her heart. She needed him to comfort her, but instead he was searching her, exploring her body inch by inch.

"What are you doing?" His touch made her breathless, but the look in his eyes froze her.

"Looking for bite marks. You're lucky to be alive. For all you know a group of vampires could have fed on you. They could have killed you, Erica! Or turned you." She didn't need him to tell her that. The thought had been running through her mind all during the torturous drive home.

She held herself rigid while he ran his hand up each of her legs, between her thighs, across her lower back, up under her breasts and her hair. His intense scrutiny made her skin tingle and her body ache for him.

"It looks like that's the only mark," he said finally. He stepped back from her, leaving her cold. "If they only drugged you, the memories of what happened might come back."

"If they only drugged me?" She turned, seeking his embrace, but instead he wrapped her in a blanket from the couch, the one he'd used the night before.

"We can use hypnotic suggestions to control humans and sometimes even other vampires. If someone put hypnotic suggestions in your mind, you won't remember anything unless they tell you to."

"I might have seen Elena and not even know it."

Max put one finger under her chin and forced her to look in his eyes. "There are worse things you might have done, Erica. I'm not going to protect you from this. You should have listened to me. You should have trusted me!"

She pulled the blanket around her against the awful cold. "I'm sorry, Max. I wanted to. But she's my sister. She told me they'd hurt her if you came with me. What could I do?"

"She's using you, Erica. Whatever sick purpose she has, she's not in trouble. She's not waiting for you to rescue her. She's waiting for you to fall into her trap."

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Chapter Fifteen

If Max had still been human, the hurt in Erica's eyes would have broken his heart. At that moment, he considered himself fortunate to be dead. It lessened the pain he felt for her.

Part of him wanted to walk away. He couldn't bear the thought that she'd been touched by Carlisle--or anyone else--that another vampire had held her and drank from her to nourish themselves. She was his. She had to be his alone.

And part of him wanted to avenge everything she'd been through and make it all right again. He wondered if she felt his hands tremble as he searched her body for marks they might have left on her. The only evidence of what had happened to her was the bloody bruise on her neck and the butterfly stamped above her breast.

"Get dressed." The order left a bitter taste. He wanted to take her to bed and sooth away with the hurt with his hands and his mouth. But it would never be over until he told her the truth, until he kept his promise and found out exactly what her sister wanted from her.

"Max, please don't leave me now."

"I'm not going to leave you. I'm going to take you with me."

"Where?"

"To see your sister." He held up his hand. "Don't ask any questions. Ask her when you see her. This ends now."

Her eyes fell and a sob escaped her. She turned away and walked into the bedroom. He stood rooted to the spot, fighting the urge to follow her. If he touched her again, he'd lose control and neither of them could afford that right now.

When she returned she looked better. She wore jeans and an oversized blouse over a cotton T-shirt. She'd cleaned the blood off her neck and the dark makeup from her face. She looked innocent, like she had this morning. Innocent and broken.

She walked past him and retrieved her keys from the floor where she'd dropped them. When she stood, he grabbed her arm and pulled her to him. "Tell me one thing, Erica. I need to know."

"What?" Her voice was thick and he saw tears well in her eyes as she looked up at him.

"Tell me you're not part of the game."

"I don't know what you mean, Max. What game? Where's Elena?"

"I'm not sure where she is, but I know where she'll end up."

"What do you mean? Where are we going?"

"To her apartment."

* * * *

Erica watched Max as he drove. She didn't say anything when he bypassed Fortune Drive and eased onto the empty highway. Wherever he was taking her, it wasn't to Elena's.

He didn't look at her. He didn't say a word until they reached a bungalow development in South Windsor. There, he parked the car, got out and waited by the back fender for her to join him.

"I don't understand, Max. How did you find her? She was supposed to be at The Underside last night."

"No, she wasn't. You were supposed to be. Don't you see? You were set up. I don't know why. Your sister has been playing you."

"No." Erica shook her head. She refused to accept that. Elena wouldn't do that. She used Erica, took advantage but only because she didn't know any other way. Her sister would never hurt her deliberately. "Elena needs help. Maybe someone is forcing her to--"

"Come on. Let me show you."

He took her hand and led her across the parking lot to one of the rundown bungalows in the development. The small house had a rusty awning over the front door. Empty flowerpots sat in a metal stand next to the concrete slab that served as a porch. The name scratched into the wrought iron mailbox was Blake, K.

Erica didn't comment when Max produced a key from under the tattered welcome mat and opened the door. "Whose place is this, Max?"

He gave her a sour look. "Maybe you can't smell it as well as I can, but come on ... can't you tell?"

He pulled her over the threshold. Inside, clothes lay on every surface in the small living room. Cartons of oriental take out languished on a round table in the corner, and on the mantle of the faux fireplace stood a picture that drew Erica's attention immediately.

She crossed the room and picked up the battered silver frame. Her own face stared out at her.

"She's living here?" She croaked the words out as she struggled to set the picture upright in its frame.

"Has been for a while. She calls herself Kyra and she's a feeder. A popular one." His voice sounded raw. She saw the truth immediately when she looked at him.

"Your feeder?"

He nodded but didn't meet her gaze. "Mine and a lot of others. She prefers not to be exclusive."

Erica's jaw clenched and she turned back to the picture on the mantle. It was all she could do not to smash it. "When did you...?"

"Friday night. After I left you."

"She'd been missing for two days by then." But Erica hadn't seen her sister in person for months before that.

"She was with a friend of mine tonight. Another investigator. He took her with him to Gregori's."

"Where is she now?"

"He said he dropped her off here. I was here earlier and by the looks of the place, she never came inside."

"So now she really is missing?" Panic welled in Erica again. To come this close and still not find Elena was torture.

"Not for long. She'll turn up. She has regulars."

Erica closed her eyes and sighed. "And you're one of them?"

"I was."

"Does feeding include ... other things?"

Max whispered the answer. "Sometimes."

"Take me home, Max. I don't need to see any more."

* * * *

Once again, sunrise threatened as Max drove himself home. He'd reluctantly left Erica at the door of her apartment and he hated himself for having too much pride to beg her to let him stay. He needed her. He hadn't figured out why yet, but he did. He needed to know that somehow she would forgive him eventually for the things he'd done with Kyra--Elena.

It rocked him that they were the same person. Erica's twin looked nothing like her. Acted, tasted, smelled nothing like her. The woman he'd come to know as Kyra Blake was like the negative image of Erica, dark where her sister was sunny, hard and jaded where Erica was soft and too naïve for her own good.

He made it home just as the sun broke over the horizon and he sank wearily into the dark leather couch. The case wasn't closed yet. He still had to figure out what Benton Carlisle had to do with it, and he had no intention of letting Kyra off the hook. He planned to find her and make her answer every question he had. Even if Erica had no further desire to talk to her sister, he couldn't leave it alone. He had to have the answers for her, even if she didn't want them.

He dialed Lucas on his cell phone as he unbuttoned his shirt.

"Yeh?"

"Did I wake you?" Max asked.

"It's the crack of dawn, for chrissake. Of course you woke me. What's up? Besides you."

"I need to tell you something about Kyra."

* * * *

Erica didn't go to the bank that morning, and she didn't go to work either.

When the sun rose and the first rays blazed through her bedroom window, she sat contemplating a bed she could no longer sleep in and wondering why it hurt so bad to know that Max had been with Elena.

She hated herself for being jealous over a vampire. Of course it was natural to feel a little proprietary. She'd given him things she'd never given another man. She'd experienced sensations with him that a human man could never hope to recreate. Who wouldn't want that to go on? But she'd learned her lesson. The part of her that had come out and enjoyed free reign this weekend was gone, banished now to the dark recesses of her mind where it belonged.

She called her office and told her manager she had the flu. She needed more than a day to recover, more than a day to figure out how to reclaim everything of herself that she'd lost and to mourn what she'd given freely.

At first she'd told herself there was nothing Elena could say to her, nothing she wanted to know. Whatever plan her sister had for her, whatever reason was behind Elena's making her think she was in trouble and drawing her into the vampire world, didn't matter to Erica. At first.

Curiosity burned in her though and she hated herself for it. Max could have told her a confrontation with Elena would do no good. He probably would have told her not to go, but she decided she had to.

She dressed slowly, careful in her movements. Her body ached and it scared her to think why. Whatever had happened to her between midnight and 4:30 a.m. had left her feeling bruised and tired. There were circles under her eyes and it took most of her strength just to force down a cup of coffee and a piece of dry toast before she left home.

Surprisingly, she had no trouble recreating the route Max had taken to Kyra's. Despite the state she'd been in, she remembered every turn. When she pulled up, she turned off the car and sat for a long time staring at the bungalow that belonged to her sister.

None of it made sense. If Elena had a secret identity as a vampire feeder, why keep two apartments? Well, Erica shrugged, she wasn't exactly keeping them both. Two months behind on the rent didn't constitute keeping a place. But still, the apartment on Fortune Avenue was full of furniture and clothing that belonged to Elena. Why would her sister leave it all?

A frightening thought took over. What if Elena didn't know who she was? What if Carlisle, or whatever vampire was involved with her, was actually using the mind control Max spoke of to convince Elena she was someone else? That had to be it. Elena wasn't setting Erica up or trying to lure her into the dark underworld of the vampires. She was trying to escape the false persona that had been imposed on her by the creatures that fed from her.

With that thought in mind, Erica felt stronger. It wasn't Elena's fault. Erica could still save her.

She got out of the car and raced across the parking lot. She retrieved the key from where Max had left it under the mat and unlocked the door. If

she had to wait all day for Elena to return she would. She'd do whatever she had to do to reach her sister.

The place looked a little different than it had a few hours before. A woman's raincoat lay across the back of the threadbare couch and a pair of high-heeled pumps lay in the corner behind the front door.

Erica's heart thudded. Was Elena here? Had she finally come home?

She called out tentatively as she moved through the apartment. The smoky smell of cloves grew more intense as she neared the bedroom.

Erica knocked on the closed door and waited. No answer. She hadn't expected any. Elena slept like the dead.

That thought galvanized her and she turned the knob and flung the door open.

A body lay tangled in the flowered sheets of the queen-sized bed. A cap of short dark hair nestled on the pillows.

"Elena?" Erica approached the bed and drew in her breath. Her sister's face was pale, bloodless. Her lips were blue. "No. No ... Elena!"

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Chapter Sixteen

"My contact told me that Benton Carlisle made a brief appearance at The Underside last night. He was with Vera Nighe and they had a feeder with them," Lucas said.

Max grimaced. He stifled the urge to throw the phone. "Carlisle is behind all this. I don't know why. He could have any feeder he wants. Why bother with Erica or Elena?"

"You said it yourself, Max. He can have anyone. He arranged to get what he wanted."

"If he's drugging unwilling feeders, he's got to be stopped. We have to let Beaumont know."

Lucas sighed and there was skepticism in his voice. "Carlisle is like a fortress. Letting Beaumont know might not produce any results."

"It's against our rules, Luke. If we don't live by rules then we're no better than monsters." Max rose and paced. Through a small, tempered window in his bedroom he saw the morning sky and it made him ache for Erica. He'd called her twice already, but there was no answer. She'd probably gone to work, in an attempt to get back to her life. Maybe she needed to be somewhere he couldn't follow.

"I'm not disagreeing with you, Max. But Carlisle is old school, like Gregori. That civilized veneer they wear is very thin. Vampires like him still believe they're superior to humans. They feel they deserve whatever they can take."

"He's not going to take Erica."

"From what you told me, I'd say he already has."

Max bared his fangs and made an inhuman sound. He couldn't live with that. He wanted Erica back, wanted to taste her again, to feel her.

Lucas spoke again after a long silence. "Max? Are you still there?"

"I'm here. But I shouldn't be. I should be with Erica. Luke, can you do me a favor? Luke?"

After another long silence, Lucas returned, his voice low. "Max, I've got my police scanner on." Part of Lucas' assignment as an investigator was to monitor human police activity and make sure that crimes that were reported didn't have anything to do with vampires.

"So?"

"There's been a 911 call from Kyra's development. A woman reported that her sister's been murdered."

* * * *

Strangers surrounded Erica as she sat on the sofa waiting for the ambulance attendants to wheel Elena's body outside. Friends and neighbors of

the woman Elena had become had gathered to lend support to the sister they'd never known she had.

"Ma'am? I have a few more questions to ask you about your sister." A South Windsor police detective loomed before her. Erica saw only a blue blur and the gleaming brass of a badge quickly flashed in front of her eyes.

"What do you need to know?"

"Did she have any enemies? Anyone you know of who might have wanted to hurt her? What about a boyfriend? Current or ex?"

Erica blinked, tried to focus on his face framed by thinning gray hair. "I don't know. She ... knew a lot of men, but I don't think she had a boyfriend."

"If you think of anyone who might have had a reason to be upset with her, you need to give me a call, all right?" The detective pushed a business card into her hand. Erica stared at it, unable to discern the name or the numbers printed on the card. She thought of Max and nodded absently.

A moment later the detective moved off, mumbling into his radio. Before Erica could process his questions further, a woman from next door put a steaming mug of herbal tea in Erica's hands and watched with watery blue eyes while she sipped it.

"I can't believe you're Kyra's twin sister," she said in a soothing, motherly voice as she settled herself next to Erica on the sofa. "You don't look anything alike."

"They're obviously fraternal," a man said. He sat on a kitchen chair that he'd brought into the living room. Erica didn't know his name.

"That's your picture on the mantle, isn't it?" the woman asked. Erica nodded and frowned into the tea. Someone said it was chamomile but it didn't taste right. She didn't care if it was drugged. In fact she hoped it was.

"How long did you know...Kyra?" she asked. It bothered her to think that these strangers knew more about her sister than she did. It broke her heart to think she'd never know the truth.

"She's been here a few months. Always said hello," the man said. Erica raised her eyes just enough to catch a glimpse of him. He looked about fifty. His face was puffy and ruddy and he wore a stained T-shirt, but despite his gruff appearance, he seemed kind. He smiled ruefully at her. "She leant me money last month when my disability check was late. I hadn't paid her back yet, but I'll get the money to you ... I promise."

Erica shook her head. "You don't have to." Elena leant someone money? If she hadn't been dead inside she might have laughed.

"Ma'am...we need you to sign this." One of the ambulance attendants came forward with a form on a clipboard and handed it to Erica.

She stared at the blurry page for a few seconds. "What is it?"

"It's the release. As your sister's next-of-kin you need to give permission for an autopsy."

The mug wobbled in Erica's hand and the nameless woman steadied

it, easing it from her grasp. “I’ll hold this, sweetheart. You take the pen.”

Erica scribbled something that might have been her name and handed the clipboard back. The attendant gave her a sympathetic look and thanked her, then he and his partner took up the ends of the wheeled stretcher. The last Erica saw of her sister was the black bag that encased her as the attendants removed her body from the bungalow.

“Is there someone we can call for you?” the woman asked. She put the mug back in Erica’s hand and patted her arm. “What about your parents?”

“They’re dead.” The words came out with surprising ease. Erica had always had trouble admitting it when people asked. It wasn’t so much the grief, which had dulled over the decade since they’d been gone, but the reminder that she was alone, except for Elena. Her twin had never been much of a family. Now even she was gone.

“May they rest in peace,” the man said. “What a terrible thing to have to tell them. In a way, they’re lucky.”

“They are,” Erica agreed. They didn’t have to see what had become of their daughters.

“I don’t drive, otherwise I’d take you back home. Do you live near here?” the woman asked. “We can call you a cab.”

“It’s all right. I’m going to stay here a while and just ... I’ll call someone later if I’m not up to driving myself home.” It bothered Erica that she couldn’t remember the woman’s name, and that she didn’t care enough to ask again.

“Are you sure? In this state, it’s probably better if you weren’t alone.”

“She won’t be alone. I’m here.”

Erica looked up and the tea splashed on her leg when she saw Max. He swept into the room and tossed aside the dark cape he’d held over his head. Another man, blond and brash looking, followed him inside and did the same thing.

Erica dropped the mug and flew into Max’s arms.

“Max! She’s dead ... she’s dead ...”

“Shh. It’s going to be okay. Elena isn’t dead,” Max said after the other man escorted the neighbors to the door.

“What!?” Erica sat up and pushed away from Max. “I saw her, Max. They ravaged her. She was bleeding, all over ... they--”

“They turned her.”

* * * *

The look of defeat on Erica’s face lasted only a moment, but it was long enough to cut Max to the bone. In that one fatal second he saw it in her eyes, the utter disgust with his kind. Her sister was a monster now--or would be when she awoke.

Erica had found her sister, and lost her in the same moment.

She sank to the couch, her eyes blank. “Are you sure?”

“Lucas checked it out. After you called 911, the call came up on his scanner. He made a few calls. You reported the bite marks, that tipped him off and he had our ambulance come for her.”

She blinked and stared at him. “What do you mean, your ambulance?”

“She can’t be taken to a hospital. They’ll put the body in the morgue and she’ll wake up in a metal drawer. We lose a lot of newly turned that way.”

“Lose them?”

“They go ... insane.”

Erica swallowed hard and clutched at him. Her fingers dug into his shoulders. “What’s going to happen to her? What are you going to do with her?”

“They’re taking her somewhere safe where she can wake up in her own time. Lucas will arrange to be with her. They were close.”

“They were?”

“They were friends. She may hate him now. That’ll be hard for him to adjust to.”

“Why? Why would she hate him?”

“Erica ...” Max pulled her close and rubbed her back as she settled against him. “Female vampires are different. Elena may not be like you remember her.”

“Max, I don’t know how I remember her. I don’t know who Elena is anymore.” Tears ran down her cheeks and he brushed them away. “They changed her. They made her into Kyra--whoever that is. She’s a feeder, who helps her neighbors and....sleeps with vampires. That’s not who Elena was.”

“You think someone used mind control on her?” Max considered the possibility. If Benton Carlisle had been controlling Kyra, it didn’t make sense that she would have been the fiercely independent woman he knew. Carlisle liked his feeders subservient. Kyra/Elena wouldn’t fit the bill.

“It’s the only thing that makes sense, Max. That’s why Elena kept calling me. She remembered who she was--maybe just a little. She wanted to get free but they kept making her forget. That’s why she wasn’t at The Underside. She wasn’t using me .... I know she wasn’t.”

Max wanted to believe her. He didn’t want to think that Kyra was involved in some despicable plot to destroy Erica just for Benton Carlisle’s entertainment. “I hope you’re right. If that’s the case, the mind control will be erased when she wakes up. She’ll be Elena again....” Or a new, hungrier version of Elena.

“I need to be with her, Max. When she wakes up.”

“No. You don’t.” He shook his head. “That’s not something you want to see.”

“She needs me, Max. You can’t keep me from her.”

“It may not be safe for you to be anywhere near Elena right now. If

Benton Carlisle is involved, you should stay away, because I think, after what happened to you last night, he may be after you."

"Why me? What could he want with me?"

"I don't know. But I intend to find out. Whatever he wants from you, Erica, he's not going to get it."

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Chapter Seventeen

Erica paced back and forth in Kyra's living room while Max made phone calls. She'd grown tired of listening to his conversations and started straightening the place up to pass the time.

The other vampire, whom Max called Lucas, had come and gone and when he left, Erica followed him to the door and looked for rain. The sky was a beautiful clear blue and there wasn't a cloud anywhere.

When Max finished his last call, she met him in the kitchen.

"Where's the rain?"

He raised his eyebrows.

"When the neighbors left before, I thought I heard someone say it was raining. Am I going crazy?"

"No," he laughed. "It's a trick we use when we have to move around in the daylight. We use the capes and we give people around us the impression of a sudden downpour so they see someone huddled under an umbrella, or a newspaper. Whatever people do so they don't get wet."

"I guess you prefer days when it really is raining." She managed a faint smile.

He nodded. "It's not the daylight so much as direct sun. It burns--but not like in the movies. We won't burst into flame. We just start to blister. It would take hours to actually reduce a vampire to ash."

Erica held up her hand. "I don't really want to know." She sat wearily in a kitchen chair and leaned back as Max began rubbing her back. "Will she remember me? Will she feel pain?"

"Yes and yes. The change is difficult. It can be violent. If she wasn't expecting it ...."

"You don't think she wanted to be turned, do you?"

"Kyra never mentioned it. Some feeders, it's all they talk about. Their ultimate goal is to become one of us."

"But Kyra wasn't like that?" The name felt strange in her mouth, like she was talking about a stranger. Technically she was.

"She never mentioned wanting to be turned. At least not to me."

"How often did you feed from her?" Erica hated herself for asking. Like a self-inflicted wound, the sudden pain of it shocked her. Her eyes stung.

"Don't do this, Erica." Max sounded tired. She looked up at him and saw something in his eyes that touched her heart. She'd wounded him, too.

"I want to know."

"We feed every two to three days by necessity. More if we have a regular feeder. I visited Kyra ... maybe three times a week."

"And you slept with her all those times?"

Max gave Erica a dark look. If she insisted on opening up wounds, he could be coaxed into adding salt to them. He saw it in her eyes. She wanted to

hurt. She wanted him to inflict pain.

"Most of the time."

"Did you love her?"

"No."

"Does Lucas love her?"

Max laughed, but the sound was cold. "Lucas doesn't love."

"Why not?"

"Do you want to talk about Lucas or Kyra? What do you want to know, Erica? Do you want to know if I enjoyed it? Yes, I did. Do you want to know if Elena enjoyed it? She said she did. She was always ready, so I guess she liked it. Did I feed from her the night I met you? Yes. Why? Because I wanted you so badly that if you'd let me, I'd have drained you. I'd have turned you just to make you mine and keep you with me forever, because I never met anyone who made me feel the way you did. Did I have sex with Elena that night? No, because I couldn't imagine wanting anyone but you under me." Max rose and grabbed her shoulders. He shook her gently until she looked up at him. Hot tears spilled down her cheeks.

"Max...tell me what to do. I don't know what to do about you." She sank into his arms and he held her. At first the contact was merely for comfort. He wanted to sooth her and calm her trembling but unbidden his body began to respond to her. Pressed against him, her heart beating against his chest, she felt like part of him. She was the part he'd been missing for so long.

He rocked her in his arms for a while longer, then tilted her chin up and kissed her. "Let me love you," he whispered against her ear. "Let me make you feel something besides pain."

She nodded and tilted her head farther back. He put his fingers against the fluttering pulse at the base of her throat, reveling in the rhythm of her body. He matched his phantom heartbeat to hers and, breath by breath, in unison, they moved together.

He led her to the living room. With all the shades drawn, it was night inside even though the sun was just about to set.

"Stand still," he told her. "Don't move." She obeyed and he began unbuttoning her blouse. She wore nothing underneath, which pleased him. He opened the shirt and let his hands roam. She sighed as he cupped her breasts and kissed them.

Next he opened her jeans. The snap and the zipper were quick, but the slide down her thighs was slow and sensuous. She obediently stepped out of the soft denim and kicked off her shoes. He pushed the open shirt from her shoulders and let it fall, then explored beneath the waistband of her panties. His fingers found her wet center and delved inside. She gasped at the gentle intrusion and closed her eyes.

"Take them off."

She didn't hesitate. He guided her to the couch and stretched her out

beneath him. He remained dressed for a time, lazily stroking her, kissing her and tasting her until her breathing became shallow. A gentle movement of his hips against her produced a low moan. He swallowed the sound with a deep kiss and guided her hands so that she could begin to undress him.

He took her slowly, watching her eyes dilate as their bodies joined. She sighed through parted lips each time he moved within her. This time he used his abilities to hold her reaction steady, to keep the ache from building so high that she'd beg for release. He thrust slowly, gliding in and out so that she could focus only on the sensation of friction within her. When she arched against him, he wrapped his arms around her and held her until she settled back again, content to feel nothing but the increasing pressure of his strokes.

"Let me..." she moaned. "Let me."

"No. I want to hold you like this forever. I don't want it to end."

She smiled through the haze of sensation. "We can't stay like this forever, but we can do it all again ... and again. Let me come and then we'll start over."

He kissed her and let her feel his tongue against hers. "You have to make another promise if you're to get what you want."

Her eyes widened. "Don't ask me for promises I can't keep."

"Then make a promise you will keep." He punctuated his question with a movement that brought her to the edge. She shuddered and clung to him, ready to dive. "Be with me, Erica. Stay with me. Don't make it end."

She looked up at him, her cheeks flushed with sexual heat, her lips parted. He moved again, a gentle thrust that brought him deep inside her. He felt the first pulse of her orgasm. "Love me."

"I do!" She gasped the words out and rocked against him as she came. The rhythm of her body brought on his own release and he gave her the sensation of liquid heat spilling inside her. She moaned. "I love you, Max. I need you."

He slammed into her, roused by her words. Even if she only meant it for the moment, for now it was enough. He clutched her to him and held her tightly as she shuddered against him. He breathed her name over and over until she slept, wrapped in his arms, sated.

* * * *

He left her in Kyra's apartment, asleep on the couch. Before he rose and disengaged his body from hers, he'd whispered to her to wait for him and not to think about her sister.

He hated using mind control. Some vampires relied on it to get away with everything, even murder. The ability kept those around him from becoming suspicious about his true nature, but it made him feel dishonest to use it. A side effect of the change, it relied more on pheromones than mental powers, but either way, it was a form of manipulation. Necessary now and

then perhaps, but dirty as far as Max was concerned.

With someone as stubborn as Erica, what choice did he have? The last thing he needed was for her to go looking for Elena and find something she still wasn't ready to accept.

He wanted to find a way to make it easy for her.

Lucas didn't answer his cell, but that didn't mean much. Max knew where to find him.

Gregori Nachevik's old estate had changed hands relatively easily when the balance of power in the vampire world shifted abruptly last December. When Gregori chose Jake Beaumont as his successor, the entire vampire infrastructure in North America rattled. Rumor had it, there was a faction brewing that planned to remove the new king from power and a faction that remained dedicated to Gregori's choice. It didn't matter to Max either way, as long as he had an ally in power when he needed it. He planned to make sure Jake Beaumont was that ally.

The gothic mansion had a modern flair, bright lights, and cleaner lines than before. The spiked wrought iron rails that had adorned the parapets and widow's walks when Gregori ruled now lined a perennial garden and gave purchase to flowering vines.

Fresh blood in the vampire world meant lots of changes but not all of them were good.

A distinguished older man in a dark suit met Max at the front door. He bowed as Max climbed the front steps.

"Mr. Hart. Mr. Vitale told us to expect you this evening."

"Is Mr. Beaumont here? I'd like to speak to him as well, if I may."

"Not this evening, sir. Come inside. You can leave him a message." The butler stood aside to allow Max to step into the huge foyer. Max stood in the center of the room for a second, looking up at the enormous chandelier dangling overhead. The place seemed so different since his last visit, larger somehow and just a shade more inviting.

"I'll see Mr. Vitale," he said. "And I'd like to leave a message for Mr. Beaumont."

"Very good, sir. This way."

The man gestured to the dark paneled wall and a hidden door slid open at his approach. A narrow, dark corridor stretched beyond. Max eyed the butler skeptically. The lower levels of the mansion had always been reserved for the darker aspects of Gregori's world. He had to wonder how they were now being used.

The man bowed. "Mr. Vitale is in the room at the end of the corridor."

"Thank you."

Max entered the hallway and crossed cautiously to the far door. He knocked.

"Yeah?"

Max opened the door and peered inside. Candlelight illuminated the small room beyond. A round bed draped in red satin dominated the room. As Max entered, Lucas rolled to the edge of the bed. He gave a sardonic look as he pulled the blood red sheet around him.

A sleek, dark head bobbed up from the nest of pillows at the top of the bed. Kyra grinned at Max as she arched languidly to a sitting position, licking her newly acquired fangs.

"I'm ready for more," she purred. "How about you, Max? Come let me show you the new me."

Max's gaze bounced from Kyra to Lucas and back as his partner began collecting discarded clothes from the floor.

"I guess I don't have to ask if Kyra woke up all right," he said. Thoughts of Erica plagued him. While she worried and mourned for her sister, Lucas was welcoming Kyra into the vampire fold with a good fuck.

"I'm great!" Kyra slithered from the bed and padded naked across the room. She sidled against him and draped her arms around his neck. He avoided her gaze, too similar to Erica's, and disengaged her slender fingers from his collar.

"So this was planned. Benton Carlisle turned you by request."

She nodded, gave him a quirky grin that showed her fangs. "He had permission, too. He did it to save me from myself. Poor messed up Elena--drowning in booze and strung out on drugs. He offered me a new life."

"I've never seen you drunk or stoned." Max crossed his arms over his chest, kept his gaze leveled at a spot on the wall above the bed while Lucas yanked on his jeans and shirt. Kyra accepted the discarded sheet and draped it artfully over her thin frame.

"Of course not. I had to get clean first. Now, I can stay clean. I don't need all that stuff anymore."

"Didn't it occur to you that if you could kick your habits as a human, you didn't need to be turned?"

Kyra laughed. "No. Do you know how many times I tried? How many times I swore to Ricki that I'd give it up, I'd let her sign me into some rehab where some half-assed counselor would tell me my problems stemmed from the fact that I didn't get a pony for my seventh birthday? And that I need to 'own' my addictions in order to conquer them? Just the thought of spending twelve weeks in a 'share circle' sent me running for a fix or a drink. I don't need that anymore. All I need is a ripe feeder." She turned a sultry grin toward Lucas. "Can you get me another one, Luke? I'm hungry again already."

"What about Erica? Why did you drag her into this?"

Kyra's laugh was ice cold. She shrugged her pale shoulders and reached for the door but he blocked her path. When she looked up at him, he saw vampire in her eyes.

"Erica will do anything for me. If you know her, you've seen that already." Kyra leaned toward Max again and she breathed in the warm

essence of Erica that lingered on his skin. “Mmm. You do know her, don’t you? She’ll do whatever she has to in order to see that I get what she thinks I need.”

Max grabbed her wrist and twisted. Kyra snarled, fangs extended. Lucas came up behind her, trapping her shoulders with his massive hands. “What do you mean, she’ll do anything she has to do?”

“Whatever Benton Carlisle expects of her. He owns her now. In exchange for turning me, I gave him Erica.”

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Chapter Eighteen

Erica floated to consciousness with the eerie awareness of a presence above her.

"Max?" His name left her lips on a contented sigh. She stretched and reached toward the blurry figure standing near the couch.

"He's not here, little one. He left you alone ... unprotected."

Erica struggled to fit a name to the cooing, feminine voice. "Vera?"

"Yes, it's me. I've come to take you home."

"Home?" Erica blinked, but her blurry vision cleared only marginally. She felt heavy and warm, weighted into the soft cushions of her sister's couch by an invisible force.

Vera hovered above her, her lovely features distended and indistinct.

"What's happening to me?" Erica's question came out breathless. She was too tired to force the words out.

"You're just resting now, my sweet. When you wake up again, you'll feel better, stronger. You'll be ready to begin your new life."

Somewhere in her foggy brain, a warning bell sounded. Panic slithered through her ribcage and clutched at her lungs. Where was Max? Why had he left her?

"Please...don't turn me," she said as her leaden eyelids drifted closed. She felt Vera's cool fingers on her forehead, brushing strands of hair from her face. A moment later all sensation left her body and she drifted into blackness.

* * * *

"We're going to need more backup," Lucas said as Max turned off the highway and headed into the rich section of town. Here, the mansions sat well back on manicured lawns and iron gates blocked the entrances to rolling driveways. Benton Carlisle's estate loomed into view before Max answered.

"If we go in with a posse, who knows what Carlisle will do to Erica. We've got our insurance policy. That's enough for now." Max jerked his thumb toward the back seat where Kyra lay unconscious, he wrists bound behind her with strips of crimson bed sheet.

She'd put up quite a struggle when Max had suggested she come with them to retrieve her sister. Knocking her out hadn't been easy and Lucas had vibrant scratches across his chest and jaw to prove it.

"Do you think Carlisle cares enough about Kyra to bargain for her?"

Max glanced at Lucas as he turned the car off the main street to circle around to the back of Carlisle's property.

"I don't think he gives a crap about Kyra. But I think he'll care about getting a chance to keep all this secret from Beaumont. An even trade--his

secret for Erica's life."

"Guys like Carlisle don't like compromise." There was a dangerous glint in Lucas's eyes and Max remembered why this man was his closest friend.

"But we're going to make him like it."

* * * *

Erica awoke gasping. She clutched at her neck searching for new bite marks but found none. She struggled to sit up and take in her surroundings. The dark paneled walls seemed to close in on her and the cloying smell of cinnamon and clove drifted from the dozen or so red candles that adorned the dark wood tables and shelves that decorated the room.

She lay on a narrow bed, swathed in white sheets. Leather-covered handcuffs hung from the high brass bedposts and across the room other chains and cuffs dangled from pegs on the walls.

This was Benton Carlisle's home and it was just as she'd suspected. Nevertheless the décor in the tiny room sent chills through her.

She rose from the bed, grateful to find her clothing intact, and tried the door.

Of course it was locked. Why would she have suspected otherwise?

Panic tickled the back of her throat. She swallowed the strange sensation and tried to take deep, calming breaths.

She was practically hyperventilating when the door finally opened.

Benton Carlisle stood in the doorway. He wore a modest, dark suit and a power tie. He leaned against the door jam in a casual stance and adjusted the diamond cufflink in his right sleeve.

"How are you feeling?" He sounded as if he were speaking to a coworker rather than a captive.

"Scared shitless," Erica replied. Why lie? False bravado would get her nowhere.

Carlisle laughed, flashing fang for an instant. "My dear, I love your honesty. Of course you're scared. But you have no reason to be. I have no intention of mistreating you. I promise."

"Can I get that in writing?" Erica inched her way backward toward the bed as she spoke, her eyes on Carlisle. His wide shoulders filled the doorway, leaving no room to slip past him.

A glowing candle full of molten wax flickered inches from her fingertips. She could hurt him, distract him and run. Something inside her turned cold with the realization that she probably wouldn't leave the building alive, but it didn't matter. As long as she didn't submit to him, didn't allow him to win. Death would be a reward at this point.

"I could most certainly put all my promises in writing. If that would ease your fears. I would be more than happy to solidify an arrangement with

you and I guarantee it's one you'll be satisfied with."

"I doubt it."

"Would you care to talk to Vera? She's quite pleased with the relationship we share. She enjoys a wonderful life, and you can, too."

"Do I have a choice? Waking up here after passing out at my sister's house sort of gives me the idea that I don't get a say in the matter."

"If you're willing to negotiate terms with me, my dear, you'll be surprised how many choices you have." Carlisle sobered and his dark eyes bored into hers.

"What's to negotiate? Why am I here after all? You want to own me. You can't."

Carlisle took one step forward into the room and Erica backed up. Her fingers rested on the edge of the bedside table behind her, glided toward a fat red pillar of dripping wax.

"Let's talk about what I want. And what you want. You want your beloved sister to be happy, don't you?" The tone of his voice changed then, and Erica's flesh tingled uncomfortably.

"You turned Elena. She couldn't have wanted that."

"Of course she did. Begged for it, in fact. I wouldn't have obliged her under normal circumstances. She was a junkie. Not worthy of being a feeder and certainly not worthy of being a vampire. I had her thrown out of After Dark one night--about six months ago. Vera felt sorry for her so we gave her bus fare and followed her to make sure she actually got on the bus. She didn't--you came to get her."

"I remember. That night was the first time she talked seriously about joining AA. She almost convinced me that she wanted to sober up for good." Almost, Erica thought. Was I already too jaded to believe her?

"She did want to. She wanted to be part of this world. I told her she had to straighten herself out or no vampire would want her."

"What does this have to do with me?"

"I saw you that night. You wore a gray herringbone suit and a white blouse. You had your hair up and your collar unbuttoned showing off that beautiful neck. I've been watching you since then." Carlisle's smile made Erica queasy. She heard the candle crackle behind her and tried not to react.

"When Kyra came back to us, sober and eager to please, I asked her about you and she told me who you were. She said you were the good twin. The responsible sister with a firm grip on reality and normal life, a boring job and a knack for being there when she needed you. I told her how she could kick her addictions permanently and take away all the pain, the meaningless desire to hurt herself and punish you for being better than her."

"I'm not better than her--"

Carlisle held up one finger as if scolding an errant student. "Yes you are! And Kyra knew that her whole life. You were the pretty one. She always hated that you didn't look exactly alike. She wanted the blonde hair, the

healthy glow. She was always the thin, pale one. You were smarter, more popular, stronger. She loved you so much--and she hated you. She hated herself for wishing she was better than you."

"Stop it! Stop it!" Erica fought the urge to cover her ears and drown out his words. "How do you know so much about my sister? How do you know things I don't?"

"I know because she wasn't afraid to tell me. I offered her something you couldn't. An end to her problems."

"That's all I ever did! I tried for years to get her help, to give her a reason to want to get better. And then you came along and offered to make her into a vampire and you took it all away over night." A bout of shivering wracked Erica's body. She inched closer to the candle flame.

"Yes. We took away your purpose. I'm sorry for that. Elena was your project for half your life. Fixing her was your .... career, for lack of a better term."

"My curse."

"Yes! Exactly. That's over now. The curse is lifted. Elena is gone and all her problems are gone, too. She's become something else. Something invincible and immortal. In a way, you made that possible."

Erica rolled her eyes. Her sarcastic laugh made Carlisle smile. "How's that? By letting her sell me to you? By becoming your playmate?"

"How bad would that be? The humans who live in the vampire world fare well. You'd have everything. You could move freely in Kyra's world and maybe even get to know the person she's become."

"She's become a slave trader. I have no desire to know her."

"What do you desire? Name it."

"Nothing you have to offer."

Carlisle shook his head at her vehement response. His right foot slid forward and panic lanced through Erica's chest again. Her throat closed as her fingers found the soft, warm cylinder of wax.

Carlisle grinned, bearing his fangs and in that instant Erica hurled the candle at his face.

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Chapter Nineteen

Benton Carlisle's scream echoed through the hallway beyond the candlelit room. Full of rage more than pain, it sliced through Erica's fear. Galvanized, she ran by him as he doubled over and tried to claw the hardening wax off his face. She bolted into the hallway and up a flight of dark stairs.

She heard him snarling and pounding after her as she flung herself through another hallway on the next level. She ran, checking door after door until one flew open at her touch.

She screamed and backed up as a thin body lurched toward her. Elena stumbled through the door, her eyes wild, her lips parted to show bone white fangs.

It took a moment for Erica to realize her sister's arms were bound behind her back and that the shadowy form behind her was Max.

"Carlisle's coming! We have to--" Elena's screech cut her off. Erica whirled around, practically falling into Max's arms as Carlisle exploded into the hallway. He reached around Erica and grabbed Elena by the arm, yanking her across the hall. They crashed together into the far wall and while Elena struggled against him, Carlisle wrapped one hand around her slender throat.

* * * *

It had been decades since Max had felt anything like the emotion that coursed through him when Erica fell into his arms. The relief combined with something else he thought he would never need or want to experience again. A possessiveness laced with fear consumed him. She was his--safe in his arms again. He wouldn't lose her, wouldn't leave her ever again.

Behind him, Lucas struggled with a captive Vera Nighe. Carlisle's concubine cried and cursed when Max produced a wooden stake and brandished it at her master.

"It doesn't have to be this way, Carlisle," Max said, his eyes on Kyra. Carlisle's thick fingers dug into Kyra's flesh and blood welled between them.

Coppery sparks danced in her eyes and she hissed through her clenched teeth. "Ricki, please don't let him kill me ...."

"Do you want to watch your sister die, Erica? Call off your dogs and I'll let her live."

"Get behind me!" Max tried to push Erica behind him, and Lucas reached forward to grab her but she twisted out of his grasp.

"Don't take another step," Carlisle warned. "I'll rip her throat out." He squeezed harder and Kyra sobbed.

"Ricki!"

"That's no way to kill a vampire," Erica said. She broke from Max's embrace and tore the stake from his hand in one fluid motion. She shoved the

razor sharp point at Carlisle and he backed up--just a breath, but enough to show his fear. His back touched the wall behind him.

"She said you'd do anything for her." He taunted Erica, but his eyes shifted back and forth, measuring, plotting. Behind Max, Lucas dropped Vera. She fell and lay sobbing at his feet.

"Don't let her kill him, please!"

Max ignored Vera. He might stop Erica from killing Kyra, but not Carlisle. She lunged forward again and the other vampire twisted out of her way. Kyra screamed, a thin, tortured sound. Blood ran down her chest and spread in a crimson stain on the tank top she wore.

Any wound Carlisle inflicted would heal, another gift of the change, but that didn't stop her from feeling the pain, raw and deep and so much more intense now with her heightened vampire senses.

The look in her eyes told Max this was something Kyra hadn't bargained for and for the briefest instant, he pitied her.

"I'll tear her head off--that will kill her." Carlisle's threats came in ragged gasps. "You had a chance. You could have had everything, could have saved Elena like you always wanted to."

"She's beyond saving now." Erica's voice was steel, a cold blade meant for her sister, but Max felt it, too. Her message was clear. No redemption for a vampire.

Carlisle growled and tore at Kyra's pale flesh. Her scream died on bloody lips as she sank to the floor clutching her throat. Max dove for Carlisle. With Elena out of the way, Erica was his next target. But before he could pull her to safety, Erica surged forward and rammed the tip of the stake into Carlisle's chest.

* * * *

She'd expected more resistance. The ease with which the stake plunged through Benton Carlisle's chest and into his lifeless heart surprised her. The shock and horror in his eyes did not. He hadn't expected it from her.

She held the stake in trembling hands, keeping it embedded in his ribcage as his large body sank to the floor next to Elena. He was dust before his head hit the floor--nothing more than a mottled brown skull and a pile of brittle bone fragments.

Vera screamed.

Erica dropped the stake and turned slowly. Framed in the open doorway, Lucas caught Vera and held her back. She sobbed and cursed, clawing at him to get to Erica, but Max blocked her path.

When Erica swayed, he caught her and she sagged against him, wishing she could feel his heartbeat beneath her palms.

"It's all right, it's all right," he whispered against her forehead. He spread his hands against her back and she felt the welcome illusion of warmth.

A whimper from Vera drew their attention, and Lucas dragged her back away from the scene of her lover's death. When Erica glanced back, Carlisle's feeder hung limp in Lucas' arms.

"She'll sleep for a while," Lucas said as he lowered Vera to the floor. "When she wakes up, she won't remember what happened here."

Erica broke reluctantly from Max's arms and dropped to her knees in front of her sister. Elena's eyes were huge--like those of a wounded animal. They'd taken on a rusty hue, like old blood. She snarled when Erica reached for her and scrabbled backward.

"Help her!" Erica reached for Max. She glanced back at him, searching his eyes. "What can we do for her?"

He took Erica's shoulders in his hands and guided her away from Elena. "She'll recover. Dead flesh doesn't exactly heal, but it regenerates," he said. "She's feeling the pain now, nothing else. She doesn't know you."

"Her throat--"

"She'll be all right."

Lucas shouldered into the hallway and knelt beside Elena. She hissed at him and the sound became a pitiful sob. Erica shuddered when Elena's bloody hands dropped limply from her wound. Her head fell back as Lucas lifted her in his arms. "I'll take care of her," he said. "You two, go home."

"I can't leave her."

Max hushed Erica's protest and crushed her to him again. She clung, squeezing her eyes shut to block out the macabre image of Carlisle's dusty bones mixed with Elena's blood.

"What happens now?" she asked as Max guided her through the door. She spared a glance at Vera, crumpled on the floor, blissfully unconscious.

"Nothing. Lucas and I will take care of it." His laugh was hollow, forced. His brittle smile made her heart ache. She'd killed one of his kind...without thought or remorse. Did he see it as self-defense or murder? Did he think she could do the same to him just as easily?

"I don't want to go home," she said.

"Where do you want me to take you?"

She met his gaze and hoped he understood that she didn't see him as a monster. "Your place."

* * * *

More than a century had passed since the last time Max's heart had pounded in anticipation or stuttered in fear. Despite the intervening years, though, he hadn't forgotten the sensation.

Memories of past pain plagued him now as he led Erica up the stairs to his apartment. Through their silent car ride across town, he'd tried to figure out why she didn't want to go home. He decided finally, it had to be because she didn't want him in her home, in her life anymore. She could leave him

here, walk away from the horrific world he inhabited and be done with him, done with her sister once and for all.

When he unlocked the door and showed her inside, she hesitated then took his hand and drew him in with her. The look in her eyes confused him, a sultry tease mixed with sadness. Did she want him, or want to be rid of him? She stepped into his embrace and he buried his face in her neck, not for blood, but to feed the empty hollow in his chest. She felt warm and pliant in his arms and the sensation chased away the ache that thoughts of losing her forever had produced.

She drew him forward into the apartment, still wrapped in his arms, and he toed the door shut behind them.

"I'm sorry for the things I said to Carlisle--not for him, but for you." The words came out in a rush when she finally pulled back to meet his gaze.

"You don't have to apologize." His faint smile faded as he searched her earnest gaze. He molded her hips with his hands and drew her toward him. "Did he hurt you?"

She raised a finger to his lips and her touch was like fire. "He didn't do anything to me. He would have.…"

Max shook his head to clear away the dark thoughts. If Carlisle wasn't dead--he might have vowed to hunt him down and drive a stake into his chest just because he'd touched Erica--just because he'd wanted her.

She ducked her head and looked up at him from under lowered lashes. "I need you, Max. Make love to me."

He felt something then, something akin to life. She needed him. Never as much as he needed her, but the degree didn't matter. It wasn't over for them. Maybe it had only just begun.

With a dark look, he led her to his bedroom.

* * * *

Erica sank down onto the hunter green sheets of Max's bed and watched him as he moved across the room. The sparse décor faded from view and she saw only his eyes, smoldering, delving into her. The pressure of his gaze made her ache.

"Don't move," he said when she arched invitingly. She straightened and lay still but the simple command caused a pulsing in the sensitive flesh between her thighs. She bit her bottom lip against the need to slither out of her clothes for him.

As she watched him unbutton his shirt and shrug out of it, she wondered if he was using his mind control on her. The events of the day faded rapidly from her consciousness. The hurt, the fear all drained away leaving her feeling light, but far from empty.

Her gaze dropped to his hands as they unfastened his belt and the button of his pants.

A moment later he stood naked beside the bed. His eyes went dark like the midnight sky.

"Max..." She forced herself not to reach for him, but her hands ached from the need to touch the smooth muscles of his arms and the dark hair that arrowed down his chest.

"Who do you want?" he asked, holding her motionless with his gaze. "Who do you want inside you? A man or a vampire?"

She held her breath for a moment and wished she could answer without words, but he had to hear it. He had to know she loved him, regardless of what he was.

"I want you," she said. "I don't belong to a vampire. I belong to Max Hart."

* * * *

The words didn't mean as much as the look in her eyes. Her husky whisper drove Max over the edge. He'd never wanted anyone, anything more than he wanted Erica to love him. He'd never felt the blood lust as strongly as he felt his need for her.

Driven by her words, he undressed her, exposing her soft skin inch by inch until she lay naked beneath him. Feather light touches of his fingertips had left her near the edge already. He saw the anticipation in her eyes, and in her pebbled flesh, her tight nipples and the taut muscles of her belly.

He spread her legs with one hand, feeling the wet heat of her. The vampire in him wanted to play with his prize, to tease her until she begged for it hot and hard. The vampire wanted to taste her blood and drink in the luscious crimson drops of her desire until there was nothing left.

The man wanted to caress her until she came against his fingertips, to kiss her blind and sink into her slowly until he felt her pulse beat around him.

The man won out. He didn't drink from her, though she asked him to. He didn't ravage her, though she'd have been willing. He loved her until she shuddered in his arms and he let her feel him come inside her and fill her with his need.

Then he let her sleep.

When she awoke, she gave him her throat. She fed him with her body and her soul and he knew that a vampire didn't own her. She owned him.

THE END

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About the Author

Having narrowly missed being crushed by an avalanche of Star Trek novels as a teenager, Jennifer Colgan vowed to one day cause the book shelves of avid readers all over the world to collapse under their own weight.

Now multi-published under her own name and as her alter ego, Bernadette Gardner, Jennifer has arrived in the digital age and instead hopes to be responsible for overloading the memory cards of e-book readers everywhere with her paranormal, futuristic and science-fiction romances.

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